

Among the Ashes by Tea_For_One_Please

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Summary:

Over Scarif, the Rebellion secured its first major victory against the Empire. Ten years later, times have changed: the Ebony Hawk crew has all but dispersed, and Mike roams the galaxy, trading valuable goods and avoiding the watchful eye of the rapidly-weakening New Republic.

No one's seen Will in six years, since his starfighter went down during the Battle of Jakku. With corruption everywhere, and the threat of a new Empire lurking in the shadows, the spark of hope of this once-united band of fighters is rapidly running out.

1. XIII

Author's Note:

Star Wars exists in trilogies, and I've been considering a third part for a little while. I'm hoping this installment will have a slightly different tone from the others. While aspects of this are inspired by the Mandalorian, the ideas are more or less my own, and have been in my head since well before the new series started..! Always annoying when that happens.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy! The updates will be slower, as I have two other projects and actual university work to do, but I will finish this narrative properly if it's the last thing I do..!

The familiar vortex of hyperspace dissolved, and the inky blackness of space enveloped the small ship, cruising gently towards a small, forgotten planet in a system in which nobody had ever taken any interest. In another time – another life, even – Mike Wheeler might have appreciated its imposing storm clouds, and the shadows cast by its colossal snow-topped mountain ranges.

Instead, he turned to his co-pilot and said wearily, “Fifteen degrees to port.” Max Mayfield nodded, and gently twisted a lever, turning the ship very slightly to the left.

In the days of the Rebellion, the sense of companionship had run high within this little vessel – it had nearly always buzzed with chatter and laughter, in spite – or possibly even in defiance – of the violence and the oppression which they had faced. They had been heroes once – survivors of the epic conflicts on Scarif, Yavin, Phorsa Gedda, Hoth, Endor, and Sullust – and had become family to each other, some of whom had known no other.

Now, though, the two figures sitting quietly in the cockpit of the *Ebony Hawk* comprised its entire crew, and the most consistent sound was the steady thrum of the engines, deep in the belly of the ship. That they were heroes, no one knew; their accomplishments, heard

by none. To the few whom they encountered, they were simply mercenaries, living outside of the control of the New Republic, following the law when it suited them, and flouting it when it did not.

The ship's ramp lowered with a creak; although never the most sleek ship in any fleet, the *Ebony Hawk* had always been, at least, reliable. Over the last couple of years, however, it had been the victim to no small amount of wear and tear. It was hardly surprising, really – without New Republic funds and operating on a skeleton crew, maintenance was harder than it had been in the years either side of the Battle of Yavin.

Mike and Max peered out before stepping cautiously out into the darkness.

“Blasters out,” Mike said shortly. “I don’t know this planet. There’s no telling what’s out here.”

“Of course we had to land at night,” Max muttered, and Mike scowled at her.

“You know why,” he hissed. “If the New Republic found out what we were doing, we’d be up in front of the Courts.”

“I know,” she said, raising her hands in surrender. “It’s just that I thought we were still on the side of the New Republic, that’s all.”

Mike snorted. “The New Republic is rapidly becoming everything they criticise the last one for.” He shifted the weight of his shoulder bag, causing it to rattle slightly. “Who knows whose side we’re on anymore?”

“It is depressing,” Max replied, a gloomy tone settling into her voice. “Even after all this time, the Empire still has so much of the galaxy in its grip.”

All this time, indeed, Mike thought bitterly. Six years since Jakku, since the Empire’s colossal star destroyers had crashed down onto the little planet’s desolate sands. Six years of supposed peacetime. And

six years since Mike had seen Will; six years since anyone had.

For just a moment, he thought he heard Will's panicked tones calling his name, and thought he caught a glimpse of his A-wing, smoke trailing from its right engine as it plummeted hopelessly towards the surface of Jakku. It lasted only a moment though, and Mike let out an involuntary shudder; he shook his head, refusing to allow himself to dwell on that day.

"Not to mention how the Senate is so contentedly ignoring what's going on in the Unknown Regions," Mike said without thinking.

"What do you mean, 'what's going on'?" Max said sharply. "What's happening out there?"

"Nothing." Mike's voice was cold, but Max was persistent.

"No," she said, quietly but firmly. "Tell me."

"There are rumours," he said as they descended the stony path down the hillside, "that some powerful Imperial loyalists have retreated to the Unknown Regions, and are trying to rebuild the Empire in secret."

"How... what?"

"They want to create a new order of fear-controlled domination," Mike said heavily. "Or, so the story goes. Some people think it's just a conspiracy," he added. "Fearmongering and the like, but I'm not convinced. I don't think the Empire will ever stop, not while there's a single star destroyer left in the sky."

Two of the planet's moons illuminated the night, fully reflecting the sunlight in twin white beams, while the third was a thin crescent on the other side of the sky. Mike shivered as an icy wind whipped through his unkempt hair, and he instinctively reached for the electrostaff, hooked in the leather strap that looped over his left shoulder to his belt.

"You think you'll need that?" Max asked with some alarm.

“I hope not.”

He surveyed it grimly; he didn't like it all that much, but damn, was it practical. He had acquired it during the liberation of Sullust, when he and Will had taken on a squad of Imperial shock troopers. Will, predictably, had done much of the heavy lifting, but in a moment of uncharacteristic savagery, Mike had driven his knife into a gap in the trooper's armour, killing him almost instantly.

“Take this,” Will had said, panting with exertion, summoning the electrostaff with the Force and throwing it to Mike. “These hallways are narrow, it could be useful.”

In the weeks that followed, he and Will had practised with it, its electrified metal exterior making it a worthy challenger to Will's lightsaber. Mike had learned quickly how to twist it the right way to block Will's neat, subtle strikes, and how to wield it to reduce the amount of blaster-fire he took.

In the years since, it had saved Mike's life on numerous occasions, and it had taken many others. On occasion, he felt a jolt of disgust at how many, but for the most part, it barely crossed his mind. After all, outside of the Core Worlds, it was very much a case of *kill or be killed*, and even now, Mike stubbornly refused to surrender to the universe's clear desire for him to die.

“Where do we start?” Max asked, pulling up the hood of her travelling cloak to block out the bitter wind's gusts.

“We have to walk a little way,” Mike replied, consulting his holomap. “The ground isn't stable enough to land any closer.”

“That's reassuring,” Max said wryly, but Mike ignored the jibe.

If his tip-off was worth anything, they'd eat well for months: with the right buyer, hesocrite amber went for a fortune on the black market, and according to his information, these mountains were practically made of such precious crystals. Mike suspected that it was only the

planet's remote location that had protected it from the Empire – or, as a matter of fact, the New Republic.

“Take these,” Mike said, shouldering his electrostaff again and dipping into his bag. He pulled out a couple of small pickaxes and passed them to Max, adding, “They’ll help with climbing, and digging when we get to that point.”

“If we get to that point,” Max muttered, quietly enough that Mike couldn’t hear.

Before too long, they reached a narrow precipice, bridging a wide gap between two cliffs. “Be careful of the wind,” Mike called as he dug his picks into the cliff wall. “Move between gusts, and no sudden movements.” He took a step out onto the ledge, pressing his body flat against the rock as the wind blew through again. “And don’t look down!”

He moved gradually, taking small steps to his left between each rush of wind. A couple of times he wobbled, prompting Max to call out an alarmed warning, but he clung tightly to the picks, until he was finally able to stumble onto the more stable ground on the other side. Max followed his lead, slightly more nimbly than him, and he grabbed her hand to support her as she, too, stepped onto the cliffside.

They followed the natural rocky path in relative silence, Mike’s eyes glued to his holomap, until eventually, he held up a hand.

“Here,” he said, his voice weaker with cold, sliding the holomap projector into his pocket. He swung a pickaxe into the rock, hammering into the cliff face with its sharp, heavy point. Small pieces of rock cracked and tumbled to the ground, until finally, a glimmer of orange could be seen through the orifice Mike had cut.

“No way,” Max breathed, and Mike allowed himself a satisfied smile: their journey had not been in vain. Max dug in her pickaxe and pulled at the surrounding rock, until there was a sizeable hole in the cliffside, revealing that there was practically a wall of hesocrite

amber underneath. "How much do you reckon this is worth?"

"Depends how much we can carry," Mike said reasonably, "but easily eighty thousand credits, maybe closer to a hundred. Besides, we can keep coming back until someone else finds out about it."

With a newfound resolve, they hacked into the thick, dark crystals, loading up their bags with as much of the amber as they could carry. Once they were done, they stacked up some of the larger rocks over the wall in a vague attempt to cover their tracks, before heading back down the rocky path the way they had come.

When they reached the narrow outcrop, Mike paused – he had forgotten about this. He seriously doubted that the ledge would hold both their weight and that of their quarry, but there was no other way back to the ship.

"Don't worry," Max said confidently, starting to untie the coil of rope she carried everywhere. "I have an idea. Head over to the other side." Only slightly reluctantly, Mike crossed the precipice, and stood facing Max on the other side.

It's times like this when I really wish El hadn't left, Mike thought irritably, but called, "Now what?"

"Get ready to catch!" Max yelled back.

"Catch what?" Mike shouted in a panic, concerned that she was about to throw one of their bags of precious amber over a twenty-foot gap. However, he breathed a sigh of relief as she hurled one end of the rope, which unravelled itself as the wind caught it, carrying it neatly over to Mike, who seized it and held it tight. "Nice one!" he called approvingly, as Max scurried over the ledge.

"Good catch," she said with a nod, taking hold of the rope and tying it around each of their pickaxes in turn, pressing them all firmly into the rocky ground.

"What are you doing?" Mike asked apprehensively.

“Potentially,” she said, sounding slightly short of breath, “something very, very stupid.” This done, she pulled on the slack end of the rope, and Mike let out a yell of horror as their two sacks of amber, tied to the far end of the rope, tumbled over the cliff edge into the abyss. At their end, the rope tightened, but the pickaxes held fast, even as the rope strained against them. Mike dropped onto his stomach, crawled to the cliff edge and peered over; there, dangling thirty feet below, were the bags of amber, swinging gently at the end of the rope. A lone piece of amber slipped from one of the bags and clattered against the cliffs as it fell into the fog below.

“You idiot,” he said, his voice shaking. “You absolute, incomparable *moron*.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” she said abruptly. “Help me bring it up.”

Digging their feet into the ground, they hauled the bags slowly up, collapsing against them when they finally pulled them onto solid rock. “That,” he panted, “was the worst idea you’ve ever had.”

“Please,” Max snorted. “I once rushed a purge trooper with nothing but a Corellian dagger – this was a long way from my worst idea.”

“Whatever,” Mike said, shivering as the wind once again whistled through his travelling cloak. “Let’s just get out of here.” He heaved his bag onto his shoulder again and, with a look of grim determination on his face, he started the last leg of the uphill journey back to the *Ebony Hawk*.

With the hesocrite safely packed into crates in the hold, Mike and Max descended once again into silence, exchanging few words other than issuing flight instructions and status reports as the ship lifted into the air.

“Set a course for Hosnian Prime,” Mike said as they exited the atmosphere.

“What did you just say?” Max looked at him in startled bewilderment. “I thought we were selling this on the black market!”

"I've been thinking," Mike said slowly. "Any black market buyer is going to ask us where we found it. We'd either have to tell them, or risk them torturing us for the information."

"And what makes you think the New Republic won't give us the same choice?"

"Oh, they will," Mike said with a sigh. "The difference is, there's something they can offer us in return."

"Dare I ask?"

"Immunity," Mike said simply. "We give them this for payment, and the location in exchange for a pardon for our, uh, activities over the last few years."

"And you think they'll accept that?" Max asked sceptically.

"I hope so."

Max raised an eyebrow. "It's been a long time since I've accepted a mission based solely on hope, Mike."

"Well, then," Mike said, with a ghost of smile etched on his face, "maybe it's time you started believing again."

The capital planet of the New Republic loomed in front of them, and two X-wings hovered either side as they approached.

"*State your business,*" called one of the pilots over the intercom, and Mike sighed.

"A trade offer of valuable goods."

"*What is your cargo?*"

"Hesocrite," he replied.

"*Do you have a landing permit?*" asked the second pilot.

"Negative," Mike said. "Not sure where I'm supposed to go, to be

honest.”

“Please activate your transponder so we can identify you.”

Max groaned, and Mike flapped his hand to shut her up. “Affirmative.”

There was a brief pause before the first pilot spoke again. *“Ebony Hawk, you are under arrest for multiple counts of theft from the New Republic and its associates. You will be escorted to the planet’s surface for detainment.”*

“Told you this was a bad idea,” Max said, glaring at him as the systems powered down.

“We’ll be fine,” Mike insisted, with rapidly dwindling confidence.

They heard a *clunk-clunk* as the X-wings each attached a tow-cable to the hull, and then lurched forward, gathering speed as they approached a landing strip down below, where they skidded to an unceremonious stop. They climbed the ladder into the cargo hold, and lowered the ramp with no small amount of trepidation. A line of figures blocked their escape; four sentients, wielding EL-16 blasters, and two burly-looking security droids, which Mike recognised from their days of infiltrating Imperial strongholds.

“Drop your weapons,” called the man in front, a sullen-looking Dowutin in a dark green uniform. Mike obligingly lowered his blaster and electrostaff to the floor, and Max lowered her plethora of blasters, knives, shock prods and assorted other small weapons. “Step forward,” he ordered, and they obeyed.

“Michael Wheeler, Maxine Mayfield, you are under arrest,” said the second officer, a shrivelled-looking human in an identical – albeit smaller – uniform. “You will appear before the Lower Court to plead your case.” The two security droids stepped forward and seized them firmly.

“Do not attempt to resist,” one of them said in its disturbingly expressive tones.

“Although with the amount of evidence we have against you,” sneered the Dowutin, “the trial is merely a formality.”

“However,” continued the old man, giving his colleague a reproachful glance, “your presence has been requested by one of the senators.”

“Which one?” Mike asked, his heart sinking.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” the old officer replied. “Take them to the cells.”

Mike and Max sat in the cold cell in silence. The cells were, in Mike’s opinion, an improvement on that of the Empire (for one thing, they generally had windows), but a prison cell could only be so comfortable, and he shifted restlessly on the hard durasteel bench. This had not been part of his plan; he had expected some level of hostility, but he had not anticipated being immediately arrested upon their arrival on Hosnian Prime. Still, at least they were not executed on sight, and were to be given a trial, even if it was arbitrary.

In fact, many aspects of life under the New Republic were not so different from life under the Empire. Obviously this sentiment was not universal – after all, under the New Republic, there was little to no threat of one’s entire planet being blasted to atoms in an instant.

However, after the celebration of the Rebellion’s victories at Endor and Jakku, the initial transition of power had been quiet. Since then, the remaining embers of the Empire had always lurked in the shadows, quietly reminding the galaxy that they were still there.

On top of this, the New Republic had been so keen to crack down on lawlessness in the Mid-to-Outer Rim that they had, at times, adopted a very do-or-die approach to law enforcement, the nature of which often felt very Imperial.

Max’s voice broke through Mike’s reflections like a knife. “I’m not

going to say I told you so.”

“And yet by saying that, you basically have,” Mike shot back, turning away from her.

“We should have just gone to somewhere like Tatooine!” Max burst out, jumping to her feet and starting to pace around the small cell. “Or Malastare, or *literally anywhere* except here. Someone would have offered us ninety thousand, we’d have told them to make it eighty-five and keep their mouths shut, and we needn’t have alerted the New Republic. Hell, I don’t think smuggling hesocrite is even a crime, so we wouldn’t actually have been doing anything illegal!”

“I know!” Mike shouted, and someone banged hard on the door. “Quiet in there!” called a muffled voice from outside, and Max kicked the bench Mike was sitting on.

He let out an exasperated sigh. “I know this looks bad, but my plan could still work.”

“Or we could be found guilty and spend the next decade in prison,” Max snapped, sinking heavily back onto the bench.

The cell door slid open with a hiss, and an all-too-familiar figure appeared framed within it. Tall and regal, dressed in white Senate robes and wearing an expression of utter fury, was Nancy Wheeler, senator for Coruscant and Mike’s older sister.

“Thank you, warden,” she said politely. “I am armed, but I’m sure they won’t try anything.” With that, the door slid shut behind her, and she hoisted her robes an inch as she descended the steps into the cell.

“Nancy,” Mike said, shocked, but he got no further before she cut him off.

“Where the *hell* have you been?” she said, her eyes blazing.

“Around,” he replied feebly, and she let out an incredulous laugh.

“Oh, you’ve been *around*, have you?” She folded her arms across her chest. “Yes, that really clears things up. You know, I thought we were good again. I thought we had a decent thing going, you and me, especially in the first year after Endor!” As if a switch was flipped, her expression changed from one of anger to one of sheer bewilderment. “And then you vanish off the grid, and I hear nothing. Nothing from you, for the better part of four years! Four years, Mike – I’ve been going out of my mind! I thought you were dead,” she finished, and the hurt on her face was too much for him to bear, so he turned away.

“I know,” he mumbled.

“And then you turn up at the capital with a criminal record,” she said, the exasperation returning to her voice. “What were you thinking?” Mike shrugged, feeling inexplicably that he was seven years old again, and that Nancy had just caught him using one of their parent’s ornaments as a plaything.

“I’m sorry,” he said, still unable to look at her.

“I looked everywhere,” she said quietly, as though he had not spoken. “I called in every favour, contacted everyone I could think of from the Rebellion.” She let out a derisive laugh. “I even went to visit the new Jedi Academy,” she said, her voice starting to shake. “It took me more than three years to get clearance, and I was only given access to the location a few months ago, after a special petition to Senator Organa. I went to see if El knew where you’d gone, but after all that time and effort, she said she hadn’t heard from you.”

“I didn’t want to distract her from her work,” Mike said quietly. “I knew it was important to her.”

“And you,” Nancy said, rounding on Max, who grimaced. “Why you? Why did he take you, and not any of the others?”

“He didn’t *take me*,” Max retorted. “I *wanted* to go! He asked all of us – me, El, Dustin, Lucas,” she went on, counting on her fingers. “But El was helping lead the Academy, Dustin had just secured a job on the New Republic flagship, and Lucas had already gone back to Mandalore.”

“So why did you go?” Nancy asked accusingly.

“Because the New Republic is a shambles!” Max cried, and her voice rang around the cell’s metal walls in the stunned silence that followed. “We were working in the very heart of its fleet, and could very clearly see that the very structure of the system is falling apart!”

“How... how can you say that?” Nancy asked, severely thrown.

“Senator, look around,” Max said desperately. “Imperial splinter groups are still holding parts of the galaxy like a vice. Bounty hunters and mercenaries are running rampant, and no one is catching them, and there are rumours – ” Mike shot her a warning look, and she desisted.

“What rumours?” Nancy asked sharply.

“About the Imperial fragment in the Unknown Regions,” Max said quietly. Nancy’s eyes widened momentarily, before she regained her composure.

“You will not repeat that to anyone,” Nancy said, her voice low and dangerous. “These reports are not confirmed, and we are looking into them. Anything else you might have heard is a scare tactic.”

“Sure,” Mike sneered, and she glared at him, but seemed to force herself to calm down a little.

“I didn’t actually come here,” she said, her voice more steady, “to discuss conspiracy theories with you.”

“Then why did you come?” Mike asked bluntly.

“To offer you a deal.”

“We want immunity,” Mike said immediately, folding his arms. “In exchange for the hesocrite.”

“Mike, use your common sense,” she said, pinching the bridge of her nose wearily. “We already have the hesocrite. Obviously your ship was searched after your arrest, and your assets seized.”

“Now who’s the thief?” he protested loudly, but she ignored him.

“Our proposal is this,” she said, smoothing out her robes and taking a seat at the far end of the bench. “There are... disturbances,” she continued, “out in the Rishaani system in the Outer Rim. If you go and investigate, this incident will be forgotten.”

“What are our resources?”

“You’ve had four years to gather resources,” she said shortly. “I hardly think you need any more from us.”

“That’s not good enough,” he shrugged. “We want total diplomatic immunity from anything we may or may not have done since our departure from the New Republic fleet.”

“But you have nothing more to offer us in return,” Nancy said hotly. “The Senate will not accept this.”

“I think they will,” Mike said with a smile. “Because you’re wrong, there is more we can give you. You have our current supply of hesocrite – but what if I told you there was an entire uncharted planet to be mined?”

“If there was such a planet, we would know about it,” Nancy said, but to Mike’s satisfaction, she sounded uncertain. From his pocket, he pulled out his holomap projector and threw it to her. She caught it deftly and turned it over in her hands, examining it.

“A map to Bintoral,” he said, “where the New Republic will find billions of credits’ worth of hesocrite amber. In exchange for a universal pardon.”

“Are you insane?” Max hissed, as Nancy scrutinised the map.

“Do you trust me?” Mike whispered back.

“Not really,” she admitted, and he smiled.

“What do you say?” Mike asked Nancy, and she frowned.

“I will have to consult the Senate leaders,” she said, closing the

holoprojector and rising to her feet. "I shall return in the morning." She paused at the door. "In the meantime, you should try to get some rest. After all, if they agree, you will have to leave immediately."

"Well done," Max muttered. "There goes our only source of income – and bargaining chip."

"Trust me," Mike said, now a lot more confident. "If she's even considering it, we've won."

"Really?" Max said doubtfully. "She didn't *sound* that positive."

"It might have been a few years, but I know my sister," Mike said, lying down on one end of the metal bench, tucking his hands behind his head. "We're getting out of here, tomorrow, Max. Just you wait and see."

2. XIV

Summary for the Chapter:

With a new mission for the New Republic, Mike and Max recruit a team of allies old and new, and set out for Rishaani to investigate the disturbances.

The town gates opened with a gentle creaking sound, and a cloaked figure stepped inside, nodding to the two guards positioned on either side as he passed. Despite his sturdy leather boots and the various weapons concealed beneath his cloak, he moved without a sound, barely even disturbing the stones on the town's central street.

A fragile peace covered the little planet of Rishaani, occupied by a number of large settlements scattered across a single island in the planet's vast ocean. This peace was maintained by one man, whom they knew only as the Governor. No one ever contacted him; it was as though he sensed the need of each town, and travelled there accordingly, consistently arriving mere days after an incident had occurred. He came only when he was needed, but he always came when he was needed, and for that they were grateful.

The town grew silent as he entered deeper into their midst; it was not that they feared his presence, for they knew he was for them. He was nonetheless formidable, and no one desired to discover what might happen, should he turn on them. After all, nobody knew anything about him: they were fairly sure he was human, but this was the extent of anyone's knowledge. There were rumours, of course: some said he was an angel sent to protect them; others, that he was an ancient Jedi of the days of the Old Republic. Many believed that he was a bounty hunter in hiding. What was certain, though, was that there was nothing he despised more than an Imperial loyalist.

"Governor," the town marshal said quietly, with a stiff nod towards the cloaked figure before her.

"What is his crime?" the Governor replied.

"Organising a splinter cell in support of the Empire," replied the

marshal. "Shot up a New Republic outpost in the valley. Pleaded guilty – proudly."

"And his companions?"

"In the castle dungeon, Governor."

"That settles it, then." The Governor's hands shifted beneath his cloak as he reached for his belt. "He will die. Bring out the others – they shall see what happens to Imperial sympathisers."

"If I die, I do so for the honour of the Empire!" the man shouted loudly. "Long may it reign, and triumph over the tyranny of the New Republic!"

"Didn't you hear?" snarled the Governor, as twenty men and women in restraints were led out into the square. From the doorways, people watched and ushered their children inside. "The Empire is dead. I watched it burn. I helped it happen. And now..." His voice dropped to a whisper. "It's your turn."

There were two flashes of white light, and the loyalist fell to his knees, before collapsing on the ground, lifeless. Expressionless, the Governor looked down at the body. In the light of the weapons he wielded, his eyes shone under his hood, framed by premature worry lines, brought on by years of loneliness and hard survival.

"What of the others, sir?" The marshal's voice shook slightly, as though she were afraid of the answer, but the Governor shook his head.

"Throw them back in their cell for the night. Put *that* in there with them," he added, nodding to the corpse at his feet. "Let them think about the consequences of their actions."

"Yes, Governor," the marshal replied, standing to attention as the governor turned away without another word. He walked slowly back through the town, and the guards hastily opened the gates for him as he approached. He nodded his thanks to them, and disappeared into the night.

Deep in thought, Mike leaned back in his cockpit chair and rested his feet on the dash.

“So, Nancy says we’re headed for Rishaani,” he said slowly. “I’ve never heard of it. Have you?”

Max shook her head. “Just reading about it now. It’s tiny,” she added, tapping something into the communications panel at the rear of the cockpit. “And, like, ninety-five percent water. The entire population lives on one island.”

“That’s good,” Mike said approvingly. “Shouldn’t take us too long to work out what’s going on.”

“The thing is,” Max said, “I don’t think this is a two-person job.”

“Well, you’re welcome to stay behind.”

“Oh, *ha ha*,” she drawled, rolling her eyes. “I mean, I think we need more people.”

“We’ve hired hands in the past,” Mike said doubtfully. “They always ask for more than they deserve, and you can never guarantee loyalty.”

“What if we asked people who don’t need hiring?” She looked directly at him, and he suddenly understood who she was talking about.

“Oh.” It hadn’t occurred to him because it was absurd – how do you contact people you haven’t spoken to in years and casually ask for a favour? “I see.”

“Dustin left me his transponder,” Max continued earnestly, “and we know where Lucas is.”

“What about El?”

Max frowned. “Maybe not El. You heard your sister, it took her years to get the right clearance.”

“Okay,” Mike said decisively, “contact Dustin on the *Serendipity*. And

set a course for Mandalore.”

The war-torn planet drew ever closer, its bleak, vast plains and mountain ranges visible on the sunlit side. Where the sun had not yet risen, the lights of the neatly-clustered metropolises shone. Mike pressed a few buttons, and the ship accelerated towards one of the smaller cities, aiming for the palace around which the other buildings had risen up over the centuries.

As they landed gently in the palace hangar, a familiar figure approached, flanked by two guards. All were sporting navy and bronzium-coloured armour, and each guard held a long spear. A pattern adorned the helmet of the central figure, swirling around the eye-lenses in a shape vaguely resembling the wings of an orsoinna, a native bird of Mandalore.

The posse stopped some feet from Mike and Max, who exchanged a nervous look; after all, a lot could change in a few years. Mike wasn't entirely sure what manner of a reception they would receive – that said, the fact that they had been permitted to land at all probably boded well.

“Commander Wheeler,” said a solemn voice under the helmet. Mike braced himself, just in case, but Lucas removed his helmet, tucking it under his arm. He extended his other hand to them, and Mike and Max shook it warmly. “Sergeant Mayfield.”

“It's been a long time,” Mike said, mirroring his civil mannerisms.

“Although we don't exactly go by those titles anymore,” Max added, and Lucas offered them a small smile.

“Indeed not,” Lucas said, turning and beckoning them towards to the hangar entrance. “How times change.”

“You're a Regent, now, we hear?” Max said, and Lucas inclined his head.

They passed through the grand double doors, and Lucas led them up a flight of stairs into a grand hallway bedecked with various

spectacular works of Mandalorian art – ancient sculptures and paintings, expertly crafted, and renovated to their former glory. “A nominal position, I assure you. After the fall of the Empire, there was something of a power vacuum – as is often the way with Mandalore.”

“So who’s in charge now?”

“Clan Kryze has reclaimed its position as the planet’s leading family,” Lucas explained as they walked. “However, the unrest during the clone wars proved that it is too much for a single family to rule the entire planet. Especially one so, ah...” He pondered his next word for a moment. “...volatile,” he concluded.

“Hence the Regencies?” Max prompted, and Lucas nodded.

“Precisely. Clan Sinclair serves the people of this land, governing from the western mountains to the eastern sea.”

“You seem to have a lot on your plate,” Mike said, suddenly having his doubts. Lucas pointedly did not answer this, but instead led them into an elegant drawing room.

“I trust our visitors. You may go,” he said, turning to his guards, who bowed and exited. As the door closed, Lucas grinned from ear to ear and threw his arms around them, although the strength of the hug – not to mention his armour – left them both slightly winded. “It’s so good to see you guys!” he laughed, ruffling Mike’s unkempt hair fondly. “Although,” he said, with feigned severity, “the word is that you’re on the run from the New Republic. What the hell are you doing here?”

“We’ve come for a favour,” Mike said, utterly bemused. “What was all that about?”

Lucas rolled his eyes. “Regency might have its perks,” he remarked, gesturing around them, “and goodness knows I’ve welcomed the reunification of my family over the last few years.”

“But?”

“It’s so *mind-numbingly* dull,” he sighed, sinking into a high-backed armchair and gesturing to the chairs opposite.

“Really?” Mike said in surprise.

“Goodness, yes! State visits with governors I don’t know or like, meetings about stock-taking, harvests, defence strategies...” Lucas shook his head mournfully. “I didn’t think I’d miss the war against the Empire, but at least every day in the Rebellion was different. Anyway,” he said briskly, clasping his hands together. “What can I do for you?”

“You were... half right,” Max said with a grimace. “We’re actually not ‘on the run’ from the New Republic, as such – but we *were* arrested for stealing from them.”

“It was, like, a couple of times,” Mike said hastily. “About a year ago, we were short on cash, so we raided an entourage of trading vessels.”

“Naughty,” Lucas said sternly, and Mike and Max smirked.

“Yeah, like we didn’t do that weekly under the Empire!”

“Ah, but that was different,” Lucas said with a twinkle in his eye. “The Empire was ‘bad’.”

Mike snorted. “The way the New Republic’s going...”

“Don’t say that loudly here,” Lucas said seriously. “Civil discussions between Mandalore and Hosnian Prime have just started, and I’d rather not jeopardise public opinion, if you don’t mind.”

“Anyway,” Max said, “in exchange for our freedom, we’re investigating some goings-on in the Rishaani system.”

“It seems someone destroyed a New Republic outpost,” Mike explained.

“Rishaani,” Lucas said thoughtfully. “I don’t know of it.”

“Few have,” Max nodded. “That’s why they’re sending us, because they don’t think it’s worth sending a delegation.”

“I thought they had their own operatives in the Outer Rim?”

“Not our problem,” Mike shrugged. “They’ve sent us, and promised to set us free if we bring back a satisfactory report.”

“So what’s your favour?”

“The thing is,” Max said, “if there really is something happening on Rishaani, Mike and I can’t handle it by ourselves.”

“We’d like you to join us,” Mike said. “Your skills in tracking and stealth operations are unmatched.”

“And you don’t want to pay for an extra pair of hands,” Lucas said shrewdly, turning in his chair and swinging his legs over the armrests.

Mike had the grace to blush. “We literally can’t afford to.”

“Well, I’m very sorry,” Lucas said, shaking his head regretfully, “but the fact is that I really can’t justify leaving without any kind of compensation. You know I’d love to, but...” He tailed off and shrugged.

“We *did* have a hundred thousand credits’ worth of tradeable hesocrite amber,” Max muttered, with a reproachful glance in Mike’s direction, “but the New Republic confiscated it.”

“For the last time,” Mike said through gritted teeth, but Lucas sat up and held up a hand.

“Hold on,” he said slowly. “You found a *hundred thousand credits*’ worth of hesocrite?”

“More or less,” said Mike evasively.

“Where?” Mike and Max exchanged a doubtful look. “You see, *that’s* a currency I can bank on,” he added. “I’m sure I don’t need to tell you how valuable that amber is. If you tell me where you got it, I’ll come.”

“The thing is,” Max said hesitantly, “the New Republic promised us diplomatic immunity in exchange for that information.”

“That is, indeed, an impressive offer,” Lucas said thoughtfully. “And you promised them exclusive access to the location, I suppose?”

“Actually,” Mike said, sitting up a little straighter, “no, we didn’t.”

Lucas opened his hands and raised an eyebrow. “In that case,” he said, the enigmatic smile returning to his face, “do we have a deal?”

An ancient speeder bike pulled to a stop at the edge of the mountain range which curved around the island’s western shore. The man who stepped off was known to few, and liked by fewer still. He did not much care; after all, it was not his job to care.

He had a commission which he was determined to fulfil: it was rumoured that a warrior lived in these mountains, protecting the Rishaanian settlements. This protector was single-handedly preventing the big crime syndicates from operating on Rishaani, which was problematic, as its mountains and shorelines contained many valuable creatures and materials. Garr Kareli was tasked with dispatching this nuisance, in exchange for a handsome fee.

A well-worn path in the cliffside became evident, and Kareli smiled in satisfaction: for all their skills, this protector – or ‘Governor’, as they were known – had not thought to vary their route out of the mountains to cover their tracks.

After a few minutes, he noticed a long line of wooden spikes marking the outer boundary of this path. Upon each one was a skull. Clearly members of many different species had fallen foul of this governor: human, Rodian, Aqualish, Quarren, Weequay, even a Zabrak. Only then did it occur to Kareli that it was possible that this protector cared not if he was found.

Still, Kareli was among the most skilled in his trade. He would have no trouble.

He continued determinedly along the mountain path, feeling the air thinning around him as he ascended. Presently, a rocky outcrop

appeared, onto which a cave opened out. A heavy mist had fallen, and the sun was rapidly sinking below the mountaintops to the west.

“You should not have come,” said a voice, harsh and commanding.

Unfazed, Kareli replied, “Neither should you, yet here we both are.”

“You saw the warning, I presume?” The voice seemed to echo around the hillside, and Kareli could not ascertain whence exactly it came.

“The skulls?” he said, unimpressed. “Yes, I noticed them.”

“And you still came.” The voice sounded curious, almost friendly, even. “Brave, for a bounty hunter.”

“You know me?” Kareli asked sharply.

“I know enough.” The cool tone to his voice had returned. “I know you have come to kill me; I can sense your misgivings.”

“I have none.”

“Liar.” His tone left no room for dispute. “You regret every kill, contrarily to most people’s ideas of bounty hunters. It’s why you’re one of the best – you understand the true value of your targets. Their value in more than credits and favours.”

“You are correct,” Kareli said with mild surprise. “Bounty hunting is an art few truly appreciate.”

“Oh, I’m not sure I’d go so far as to call it ‘art’,” said the voice dismissively. Kareli scowled. “In any case, it is well-documented that the Force moves strongly around someone who is prepared to kill.”

“The Force?” Kareli said scornfully. “In my travels I have seen little that would suggest the existence of an omnipotent force affecting the fate of the galaxy.”

“Then you have not seen enough,” said his companion simply. “Chance, was it, when the Empire fell? Did chance guide the two torpedoes into the exhaust port of the Death Star? Was it simply fortuitous that the clone wars ended the very night a particular Jedi

Knight swore allegiance to the Republic's Supreme Chancellor?"

"You have quite a way with words," Kareli said evenly. "Have you considered a career in politics?"

"Alas, I have not the patience to deal with self-righteous senators," replied the voice. "My place is here, protecting these people from external threats – and sometimes, each other."

"Your *protection* is inconvenient to many," Kareli said. "That's why I'm here."

The voice just laughed. "I see. So you are performing a public service?"

"I grow tired of your scorn," Kareli snapped, pulling a blaster from its holster. "Let's fight."

"Make your peace with your gods," said the voice coolly.

"I've killed hundreds," Kareli spat.

"You've never fought me." As if by magic, the mist began to dissipate.

For the first time, Kareli felt startled. "How are you doing that?" he asked sharply. A figure in a hooded cloak stood before him, and despite his bravado and years of expertise, Kareli took a reflexive step backwards.

"Brilliantly," was his simple reply.

Instinctively, Kareli fired. The figure casually twisted his body to the right, allowing the bright red blaster bolt to fly past him and burn a scorch mark into the rock behind. Kareli fired again, and once again, his opponent dodged it.

He fired three more rounds, but this time, a beam of white light seared through the night sky, deflecting the blaster bolts back at Kareli. One struck him in his knee between the plates of his durasteel armour; Kareli let out a cry and sank to the ground.

“You brought this on yourself.”

His blaster flew from his hand, and another twirl of the shining blade sliced it into two pieces. He tried to stand, his arms seemed to be pinned to his sides, and his legs were locked in place.

“Who are you?” he shouted through the pain. “Some sort of Jedi?”

As his opponent approached, Kareli heard the faint hum of the blade he wielded, and in its light, he saw the green of his hazel eyes. “This weapon does not make me a Jedi,” he said quietly. “I rejected that title a long time ago.”

“Spare me,” Kareli pleaded. “I swear, as long as I live, I will never speak a word of what I’ve seen here!”

He tilted his head very slightly. “You know what?” he said, sounding satisfied. “You’re absolutely right.” The beam of pure-white energy twirled in his hand again, and Kareli knew nothing more.

Mike tilted the throttle very slightly, guiding the *Ebony Hawk* out of the path of a passing rock, nodding to Max to put them at cruising speed through the asteroid field. Here the *Serendipity* was docked, along with a few support ships. According to Max’s intelligence, its crew was awaiting further orders following the New Republic’s recent victory on Dandoran, once an Imperial stronghold providing the remaining splinter groups with ships and weaponry.

“We’re receiving a transmission from the capital ship,” Lucas called from the communications desk.

“Put it through,” Mike said, pulling on his headset so he could speak directly.

“*This is Bridge Commander Haltone. Ebony Hawk, submit your transponder link and state your purpose.*”

“Submitting now,” Mike replied, pressing a button on the dash. “Requesting temporary boarding to refuel, and a meeting with a member of your command.”

“Denied,” said the bridge officer. “Our information logs your intended destination as the Rishaani system, and you are therefore out of bounds. This is a parole violation.”

Max groaned and leaned her head against the dash, and Mike pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation. “Affirmative – that is our *final* destination, on a reconnaissance mission for the New Republic. I repeat, we require fuel, and a meeting with a member of your command.”

“Such a request is irregular. Name the officer.”

“Commander Henderson.”

“Please hold.” The line went dead, and Mike turned the ship, intending to circle around the *Serendipity* while they waited. He thought it best to remain near the hyperspace lanes, in case things turned nasty.

“That went well,” Max said drily.

“We knew it wouldn’t be especially smooth sailing,” Mike retorted. “Personally, I think that was about as good as it could get.”

“Are we in the hangar?”

“We haven’t been pulverised yet,” Lucas added helpfully, and Max raised a pointed eyebrow.

“Let’s just wait and see what they say,” Mike said, in as soothing a tone as he could muster. Truthfully, he was far less confident than he was letting on.

“Ebony Hawk,” said the bridge officer, sounding thoroughly annoyed, *“you are cleared to board. Continue your course and dock in hangar three.”*

“Copy that,” Mike said, jumping to attention and spinning them around. “Approaching now.”

They brought the ship gently to rest in the *Serendipity's* hangar, and as they descended the boarding ramp, they placed their blasters on the floor as a demonstration of peace. Max had a quiet word with one of the technicians, while Mike scanned the hangar.

Suddenly, a set of blast doors opened, revealing a familiar figure in a beige officer's uniform, his flat-topped cap perched precariously on the vast set of curls that adorned his head. As Dustin rushed to them and threw his arms around each of them, Mike couldn't suppress the smile forcing its way onto his face.

"I thought they were joking," Dustin said, grinning from ear to ear. "I couldn't believe it was really you!"

"Surprise," Mike joked, and Dustin punched him playfully in the arm.

"Where the hell have you *been*?"

"It's a long story," Max said, catching Mike's eye. "We need your help."

They pulled up some crates and sat in a circle, filling Dustin in on what had been happening to them over the last few years, and recounting their current mission.

"...that's why we need you," Mike finished. "Your authority within the New Republic and technical expertise could be vital." Lucas nodded, and Mike smiled again. "And it would be great to have the old team back together."

"Most of us, anyway," Max said quietly, and a sombre silence descended.

"Yeah," Dustin said solemnly. "Even after all this time, it felt wrong not seeing Will and El come down that ramp with you."

"El's alive, at least," Mike said before he could stop himself.

"I know." There was a beat, and Dustin spoke again. "I'm sorry about Will."

"It wasn't your fault," Mike said bluntly, and Dustin shrugged.

"I know, I didn't mean that. I just know how much he meant to you. To all of us, of course, but you in particular."

Mike nodded once, unable to meet his eye.

"So... will you come with us?" Lucas prompted, clearly trying to steer the conversation back into more comfortable territory.

"Without hesitation," Dustin said grandly, and the general mood seemed to lift ever so slightly. "I will go and submit my leave, and I will meet you back here in no more than an hour."

"Wait, you can just *leave*?" Max said in amazement. "Just like that?"

Dustin snorted. "I haven't taken a day off in the last two years – if they refuse me this, I'm handing in the uniform." With that, he turned on his heel and marched away, leaving them all in no doubt that he would return.

Distant screams and blaster-fire punctuated the silence, muffled by the heavy wooden trapdoor of the cellar. A mother sat in a far corner of the room, sheltered under a table, with a small, terrified child nestled under her arm. She had packed a number of old crates around them, to shield them from view in case their hiding-place was breached.

The marauders had come in the night, storming the capital in numbers hitherto unseen. The populace had retreated into their homes, praying to whichever gods they could think of that their attackers would pass by them. Nobody knew whence they came, and nobody dared ask. There were murmurs that they had been sent by one of the big interplanetary gangs.

The child under her arm let out a whimper, and she stroked his forehead, whispering words of reassurance in her native tongue, words she largely did not believe. One phrase, though, she hoped beyond hope would prove correct.

"*He'll come*," she whispered. "*The Governor will come. He will help us.*"

“...and then I was all like, ‘surrender, you’re surrounded,’ and the Imperial officer was like, ‘you can’t stop the Empire,’ and I was like, ‘oh yeah? Look outside,’ and pointed out of his office window at his burning factories.” Dustin tailed off and sighed. “Then he was tried and found guilty of war crimes. It was a good moment.”

Mike was hardly listening, but it didn’t really matter – the ship was full of life again, for the first time in years.

Even so, as the little ship touched down gently on a flat, rocky plain half a mile from a settlement, Mike’s misgivings returned. Night was falling, and a mist was settling over the island.

“Literally anything could be out there,” he said, peering doubtfully out of the cockpit viewing window. “I think we should wait until morning.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Max said promptly. “We’re in mid-winter, so that’s about fifteen hours away.”

“Besides,” Lucas added, “we’re not far from the nearest settlement, and we’re all armed to the teeth.”

“Not all of us,” Dustin said in a small voice, holding up his single DH-17 blaster.

“Don’t worry,” Max said in a falsely sweet voice. “We’ll protect you.”

“Why don’t I find that reassuring?” he muttered as Lucas led them out into the fading evening sunlight.

To their relief, the ground was firm and easy to traverse, so it didn’t take them long to reach the settlement’s outer wall. They had not expected, however, to stare down the barrels of half a dozen heavy blasters as they approached the large gate set into the stone.

“Who are you?” someone demanded, and Dustin stepped forward.

"I got this," he said quietly, before clearing his throat and calling, "I am Commander Dustin Henderson of the New Republic. This is my crew."

"His crew, now, are we?" Max muttered to Mike, who smirked.

"We are here to investigate a recent attack on one of our outposts," Dustin continued. "We graciously request entrance, and a meeting with your highest authority." Silence followed this grand proclamation, and a few moments later, the gates swung open.

The sight shocked them: smoke trails curled from buildings, and rubble and litter was strewn about the street. A nasty scent of stale blood filled the air, and people peeked through the tiniest cracks in their doors before slamming them firmly shut.

A stern-looking woman in robes of deep crimson approached. Dustin bowed, and they followed his lead. "Greetings, ambassadors," she said, her voice clipped. She looked tired, and given the state of the main street, Mike was hardly surprised.

"Greetings," they echoed.

"I am Marshal Penloc," she said. "My guards report that you are from the New Republic."

"That's correct," Dustin said.

"What... happened here?" Mike asked hesitantly, and she sighed.

"Come," she said, turning and indicating that they should follow. "We should talk inside. Allow me to offer you some refreshment."

The building into which she led them was only slightly grander than those which surrounded it, although a number of exotic plants lining the walls, which drew Lucas' interest.

"Your outpost was destroyed by Imperial loyalists," said Penloc. "They have since been arrested and punished."

"I'm pleased to hear it," Dustin said, but Lucas spoke up.

"If the culprits have been dealt with, what business did you want to discuss?"

"For the last three nights," she said, "our town has been assaulted by marauders. Rishaani's peace has always been tentative, disrupted mainly by splinter groups who remain loyal to the Empire."

"It's the same on many worlds," Max said, shaking her head.

"Indeed." A protocol droid shuffled in, supporting a chromium tray with five glasses and a tumbler full of a dark liquid, which they all took and sipped. It was strong and rich, but sweet, fruity, and not at all unpleasant. "Ordinarily in such cases, we receive assistance within a couple of days, but he has not come."

"Who?" Lucas asked.

"He calls himself the Governor," said Penloc. "He travels between the towns, maintaining peace and order between us. Nobody knows who he is, or how he knows where to go. However he finds out, though, he's missed it this time."

"He hasn't come?"

"Like I say, it's been three days." She paused and sipped her own drink. "I have communicated with the leaders of some of the other settlements, and it seems they are under siege as well."

"So you think he's spread too thin?"

"It's very possible," she nodded. "It would certainly explain his sudden absence."

"Tell you what," Mike said thoughtfully, but exactly what he had planned to say, no one found out, as a side door opened and one of Marshal Penloc's attendants entered, looking distressed.

"What is it?" she asked sharply.

"Ma'am," he said urgently, "he's here."

Marshal Penloc glanced between her guests and her attendant. “Well, then.” Her tone was brisk, but Mike could sense the relief in it. “I suppose you will meet him for yourself. Send him in,” she added, and the attendant bowed and stepped aside.

“Marshal.” Mike felt a vague sense of dread settle in the pit of his stomach as a figure shrouded in a cloak of dark grey entered, the hood covering much of his face. “I apologise for my delay in coming to you. It appears similar incidents have occurred in almost every town across the island.”

Mike was caught off-guard – he had expected a low, rough voice, like that of many bounty hunters he had encountered, but although he sounded weary, this man’s tone was rich and dignified – and weirdly, harrowingly familiar.

“We presumed as much,” Penloc said, gesturing to her companions. “Governor, these people are from the New Republic. They are investigating the attack on the outpost.” The hood moved slightly as the figure turned his head, and then the stranger seemed to freeze.

“I’m Captain Mike Wheeler,” Mike said, pushing away his apprehension, and attempting a friendly greeting: if they were to be allied with this man, he did not wish to give a bad impression.

His reply was profoundly unexpected. “I know.” Mike paused, wondering how he was supposed to respond to this statement. However, before he could, the governor lifted his hands to his head and lowered his hood, and Mike’s heart just about stopped.

For this man, although certainly unfamiliar, was no stranger. His chestnut hair, although well-kept, was longer, and marked by occasional, premature grey streaks. His face had more lines, and a series of nasty burn scars adorned the left side of his jaw, descending below the collar of his cloak. His hazel eyes, however, caught the light with a glint of green which Mike had always loved. This was, still, unmistakably Will.

“Fucking hell,” Dustin exclaimed, breaking the silence, and Max smacked him on the chest in rebuke. Mike, his heart racing in disbelieving wonder, took a step towards Will, and it was only at this moment that he noticed that Will didn’t look remotely pleased to see them.

“Will,” he breathed. “I thought...”

“...that I was dead?” Will finished his sentence for him, folding his arms across his chest. “I gathered.”

“Will, wait.” Mike was starting to panic. “We looked for you, honestly –”

“Save it,” he said shortly. “I have work to do.” With this dismissal, he turned and began talking to Penloc.

This was wrong; this was all wrong. How many times had Mike imagined this scenario – finding Will, discovering that he wasn’t dead? How many nights had Mike slept alone, dreaming of holding Will in his arms again? Yet here Will was, standing in front of him, alive and (apparently) well, and he was barely even acknowledging that they knew each other.

“They will return tonight,” Will was saying. “It has been the same elsewhere – they will persist either until they have killed everyone, or until they are defeated. Many of the smaller settlements,” he continued bitterly, “have already burned.”

“I am sorry for this,” the marshal said quietly. “I will not allow my people to suffer the same fate.”

“We’ll help,” Max piped up. “We can stay tonight, and defend the town.”

Will pursed his lips, but the marshal spoke first. “I welcome any assistance,” she said tactfully, “although I leave the logistics to you, Governor.”

“Governor?” Mike echoed.

“It is the title I have adopted,” Will said, addressing Mike again, but

not meeting his eye.

“But it’s not your name,” he replied, suddenly angry.

Will looked directly at Mike, his eyes hard as stone. “Our name tells a story of who we are,” he said coldly. “The name you use is representative of my old life. That life died on Jakku.” Mike felt every eye on him, and suddenly felt very aware of the space he was occupying. Who *was* this version of Will?

Mike said nothing more as Will and Penloc led them out of her residence, discussing defensive strategies and paying the crew no attention.

Lucas caught his arm and held Mike back a few paces. “You okay?” he asked gently.

“No,” Mike said savagely, holding up his hands in frustration. “I just... I don’t...”

“He’ll come round,” Lucas insisted. “I’m sure of it.”

“Did you see the look on his face?” Mike hissed furiously.

“Think of it from his point of view,” Lucas said patiently. “He disappeared, and we didn’t find him. Even El didn’t find him, and she tried reaching for him through the Force for weeks after Jakku.”

“What’s your point?”

“Well, he probably doesn’t know we looked for him,” Lucas shrugged. “As far as he knows, we just forgot all about him.”

“But that’s not true!” Mike felt outraged at such a notion.

“But he *doesn’t know that!*” Lucas repeated.

“Then I’m gonna tell him,” Mike replied savagely, but Lucas caught his arm again.

“Don’t.” His voice was slightly muffled behind his helmet, but Mike could hear the urgency in the warning. “You heard him – he’s here to do a job, and it’s clear he’s not going to let us distract him from it.”

“Fine,” Mike muttered. “But the *second* this is over I’m going to sort this out, and I’m not leaving unless he’s on the ship with us.”

“Maybe don’t be quite so forceful when you talk to him.”

“Whatever, Lucas.”

Preparations took some time: the town’s inhabitants had to be briefed and armed, the outer perimeters secured, the town’s children and valuables hidden. Night had well and truly set in by the time Mike climbed up the town wall, where Lucas was positioned in a hastily-assembled sniper’s tower. He lay down on his front, a borrowed targeting rifle tucked under his arm, and a bag of disarmed thermal detonators at his side in case they came too close.

He heard movement to his right and glanced over, to see Will kneeling down, looking through a pair of macrobinoculars.

“Hi,” Mike said quietly. “I like your new look,” he offered, and he meant it. Will had taken off his big cloak, a sure sign that he was ready for a fight. His dark grey getup was somewhere between a standard-issue flight suit, an officer’s uniform, and the classic Jedi robes, with a gauntlet on his left hand in the same colour. “What’s with the glove?”

“They’ll be here soon,” Will said shortly, and Mike sighed. He glanced back at Will, and from this position, he found it was becoming increasingly difficult to recognise the man he had once loved.

His eyes drifted to Will’s belt, from which a lightsaber hilt was clipped, but Mike could immediately tell that it was not the same one Will had wielded during his time with the Rebellion. Gone was the elegant haysian smelt hilt, fused with a marble-like stone; in its place hung a hilt of a much simpler design, crafted from a cheaper, silver-

blue metal.

“New lightsaber?” Mike said, taking another tentative stab at light conversation.

“Two,” Will said, and Mike’s eyebrows lifted in surprise, not least because Will had finally acknowledged him.

“What happened to your old one?”

“I have to survey the other checkpoints,” Will said bluntly. “We’ll talk later.”

“Nice to see you,” Mike called after him, with only a hint of sarcasm. He noticed Lucas looking down at him from his tower, and offered him a thumbs-up, suddenly feeling very, very alone.

Without warning, a blast from a horn rent the air, and someone shouted, “*They’re coming!*” Mike swallowed hard, put his eye to the blaster scope. All they could do now was wait.

3. XV

Summary for the Chapter:

As a band of marauders launch an attack against the town, Mike tries to persuade Will to leave with them.

A terrifying silence gripped the town. No one dared make a sound as a massive patchwork freighter hummed overhead and touched down somewhere in the woods. Mike knew instinctively that every person present was saying the same prayer: *maybe they'll leave, maybe they didn't notice the town*. But the marauders had come every night for three days. Will was right – they would not leave until they were vanquished.

Come on then, he thought firmly, his finger poised on the trigger of his targeting rifle, pointed resolutely towards the trees. A movement caught his eye, and he turned the blaster a few degrees.

Sure enough, figures were emerging from the trees: Aqualish, dressed in oilskins and wielding an assortment of blasters and vibro-axes. He heard a shot from Lucas' tower to his right, and one fell dead – first blood. Mike, too, lined up the shot and fired. A blaster bolt whizzed over his head, and Mike quickly isolated the shooter and took him out as well. A powerful blast shook the ground: presumably Max's proximity mines had been triggered, which meant there was more than one group. Clearly they had their work cut out for them.

They were advancing quickly; like humans, Aqualish had once been persistence predators, treacherous in numbers and capable of covering long distances quickly and without tiring. It made them ruthless mercenaries, upon which their people regularly capitalised. Mike soon abandoned his targeting rifle in favour of his shorter-range blasters and the bag of detonators at his side. They were starting to shoot in earnest, however, and Mike was not especially well-protected – unlike Lucas, whose armour could withstand a colossal amount of damage before it would start to wear.

He ducked down below the wall's battlements, and hurled a thermal detonator over his head. The explosion rang out a few moments later,

accompanied by a few shrieks. They were getting closer, though, and he was running out of time. In a moment of desperation, he activated one of the detonators, then placed it back in the bag, before swinging it back and throwing it with all his strength towards the advancing mercenaries.

“Get down!” he yelled to Lucas, scrambling halfway down the ladder and jumping to the ground as the bag of explosives detonated with enough force to shake the ground. Lucas’s tower wavered from the strength of the blast, and started to topple, but Lucas simply leapt out and activated his jetpack, hovering in mid-air and blasting at the mercenaries below.

As per Will’s plan, Mike now activated the trip mines either side of the massive iron gates. They had hoped that this necessity would not present itself, but their attackers were more efficient than they had anticipated. Mike then backed away, as Will reappeared, seemingly perfectly calm, but with a look of grim determination on his face. As he watched, Will slowly unclipped his lightsabers from his belt and bared the hilts in front of him, and Mike couldn’t help the half-smile that crept onto his face. Clearly they were in for a show.

“Brace yourselves!” Lucas shouted from above, and the gate suddenly dented inwards, the impact ringing across the street. A tile fell from a roof, shaken by the tremor, and smashed on the stone road beneath, as shots fired in the distance, from other places in town.

“That won’t take many hits,” Mike called to Will. “They have vibro-axes.”

Will snorted. “Let them try it.”

Another echoing *clang* boomed across the town. The noise made Mike’s blood run cold, but as if in reply, the sky hummed with the familiar hiss of lightsabers. He blinked in surprise, though, at what he saw: instead of his familiar emerald blade, Will’s face was illuminated by pure, blinding white light.

He barely had time to make sense of this before Will’s fists curled a

little more tightly around the hilts, and the gate's defences gave way. They blasted forward with the force of a seismic blast, but Will, in total control of the situation, simply opened his hands, keeping his thumbs curled around his lightsaber hilts. The gates shot neatly through their frames, dispatching a dozen mercenaries careless enough to have been stood directly behind them, before collapsing in the dirt a few yards outside the town's perimeter.

Mike's trip mines took out another small cluster, but suddenly they were approaching in hordes.

"Open fire!" Will called, and to Mike's surprise, blaster-fire rained down from just about every window with a sight-line to the gate. Lucas, for his part, tipped his head forwards, and his single-use rocket soared in a graceful arc, scattering both the living who saw it coming, and the dead who didn't.

Will remained rooted to the spot, but was taking out nearly as many as Mike or Lucas: at least one of his blades was nearly constantly moving, deflecting the attackers' blaster-fire back at them with the speed and precision of a Z-6 rotary cannon. The other, when not in use, he threw occasionally, impaling an unsuspecting mercenary, before summoning it back to his hand to continue its task of defending Will. So transfixed was he, Mike could barely focus on his own job.

After all, Will had changed so much in the six years since Mike had last seen him. He had seen the best and worst of this man, and had loved him through it all. On Hoth, he had witnessed him topple an Imperial walker with only his lightsaber and a length of rope. They had once raced speeder bikes through the vast forests on Radhii. He had seen the rage in his eyes as his blade clashed with El's on Yavin IV, and the regret that followed his fall from grace. He had fought back-to-back with him as they reclaimed and destroyed the Imperial castle on Mustafar. And he had seen the kindness in his smile as he helped a group of Sullustan younglings onto a refugee transport, having liberated them from the Empire's munitions factories. For better or worse, Will fought valiantly, laughed quietly, and loved fiercely.

Physical appearance aside, though, this was Will as Mike had never seen him. Every move he made, every life he took, and every soul he saved, he did without the slightest change in expression. Once he'd got over the shock of their initial meeting, Will had been decidedly, peculiarly neutral. There was no hatred in him, no anger, no bitterness. Neither, though, was there any of the joy, or the love, or the *fun* of which he knew Will was capable. *Perhaps*, Mike thought in a rare moment of fancy, *that's why his lightsabers aren't green anymore.*

An enemy blaster bolt practically grazed his ear, bringing an abrupt end to his musings and reminding him that he was, in fact, in the middle of a warzone. It was a grotesque sight: the Aqualish, with no thoughts of surrender, were having to clamber over the corpses that were piling up at the ruined gates. Lucas was keeping them from scaling the walls, but he was just one man, and even he was becoming overwhelmed.

"Will!" Mike yelled, and Will caught his eye, his brow furrowed in intense concentration. "They're not letting up! Isn't it time we fell back?"

"To where?" Will shouted back, and Mike blinked.

"You didn't plan for a retreat?"

Will's reply was drowned out as Lucas flew overhead, dropping a barrage of thermal detonators on the swarming marauders in an attempt to thin the herd.

"At least tell me you *have* a plan!" Mike called desperately, as Lucas fired his wrist-cable at the gate frame and yanked it to the ground, bringing down a few Aqualish with the frame and subsequent rockfall.

"Cover me." Will suddenly sheathed his lightsabers, and Mike redoubled his efforts, specifically targeting any attackers who seemed to be aiming at Will, who had dropped to one knee and closed his eyes.

Presently, the ground seemed to tremble, and the blaster-fire slowed to a stop. Even Lucas ceased shooting, landing gently on a nearby rooftop. Max and Dustin reappeared, whispering to Mike that the attackers had given up attacking the outer walls in favour of the gate. The Aqualish muttered among themselves for a moment, before apparently deciding it was some kind of trick, and unleashing a blood-curdling war cry. At that very moment, though, something ripped the two sides of the rapidly-crumbling wall from its foundation, lifting the pieces slowly into the air.

“No way,” Dustin breathed.

“Could he always do that?” Max murmured; Mike didn’t even know how to reply.

The Aqualish let out a shout of alarm, turning on the spot, trying to identify the entity behind this display of strength. A few made a break for it, and Lucas launched into the air again, picking them off one by one as they fled. The pieces of the wall rose ten feet in the air, breaking apart into smaller chunks, then hovered over the crowd of raiders standing where the gate had stood. Suddenly, Will opened his eyes and the stones dropped, almost immediately silencing the collective cry of fear of the town’s doomed attackers.

An eerie quiet descended upon the town, broken as Lucas fired his last shots, toppling the final, fleeing marauders. Just like that, without preface or warning, the fight was over. The townspeople crept into the street to see what had happened, and a triumphant cheer broke out among them as Will ignited one of his lightsabers and held it aloft, as a mark of their victory.

It was several hours before Mike found himself in Will’s company again, when he was perched on the parapet of the surviving wall, watching the residents’ efforts to break up the pieces Will had dropped on the marauders.

“May I sit?” said a familiar voice, and Mike nodded as Will sat down beside Mike. “I appreciate your crew’s help tonight,” Will said quietly. “Your determination and bravery inspired the townspeople, I think.”

"We came to investigate a disturbance," Mike shrugged. "I'd say we found one."

Will nodded sagely. "What will you tell the New Republic?"

"The truth," Mike said simply. "That the outpost was destroyed by Imperial loyalists, and that they were dealt with by the local law enforcement." Will nodded again, and Mike broke the silence. "What happened to you, on Jakku?"

"You saw what happened," Will replied, his voice a fraction rougher. "I lost control, my A-wing went down."

"We looked for you, though," Mike said softly. "We didn't find you."

"Crashed through the wall of a downed star destroyer. Its shields were down, of course, and at that speed I tore through it like parchment." Will still did not meet his eye, gazing instead up into the starry sky. "Although I must admit I'm surprised to hear that you searched for me."

"Why?" Despite what Lucas had said, Mike was both shocked and appalled by this statement.

"Because I thought if you'd looked, you'd have found me," Will said simply. "El could have reached through the Force; she'd have known I was alive."

"She did look," Mike said, troubled. "At every free moment, for the best part of two years."

"Then I don't know," Will shrugged. "Maybe the Force wanted me to end up here."

"Maybe," Mike said, although he didn't really believe it. "So how did you get off Jakku?"

"Found an abandoned hangar bay on the destroyer." Will pulled a small stone from the wall and tossed it beyond the town's borders. "Found a TIE Reaper with a working hyperdrive."

"Why didn't you come back to us?"

Will snorted. "You think I was going to cruise up to Hosnian Prime, or Coruscant, in a stolen Imperial fighter days after the Battle of Jakku?"

"Well, not when you put it like that," Mike muttered.

"Besides, I wasn't exactly in a very fit state," Will said. Mike looked questioningly at him, and he sighed. "I suppose you might as well know." He pulled off the sleek gauntlet, and Mike gasped: protruding from Will's left sleeve was a hand of dark durasteel. "The A-wing's cockpit jammed, and my arm was in the way. Took it clean off a little below the shoulder socket." A wave of nausea hit him, and Mike felt a sudden urge to vomit. "Hardly felt it, to be honest," Will said, far too matter-of-factly for Mike's liking. "Adrenaline or something, I suppose."

"That's awful," he managed to mutter, and Will hummed.

"Had to sell my lightsaber crystal to pay for the prosthetic," he added. "I've still got Chester, though."

"You have?" Mike asked, perking up slightly.

"Of course, he doesn't work," Will said gloomily. "The crash wrecked him, and goodness knows I couldn't afford to repair him, so he's on the Reaper. I use him as a nightstand. Far less than he deserves, really."

Mike cracked a smile. "I'd say it's exactly what he deserves."

For the first time, a single low chuckle escaped Will's mouth. "Maybe."

They were quiet for another moment, but Mike had more questions. "So, if you sold your crystal..?"

"Ah, yes," Will said, passing him one of his new sabers for his inspection. Mike pressed the activation button, turning it in his hand and examining the snow-white blade. "Made the hilts from what I could find lying around the Reaper. Found the new crystals in a junk stall on Cospa Doon. Got them for almost nothing, clearly the trader had no idea what they were."

“Didn’t know they came in white,” Mike mused.

“They don’t, generally,” Will said, sounding slightly bitter again. “They were red – from an Inquisitor’s weapon, I suspect, as they’re absolutely a pair. They belonged together, and I sensed their call from the next sector. I purified them,” he said, clipping the hilt to his belt again as Mike passed it back. “Purged the darkness from them.”

“Hence the colour?”

“Hence the colour,” Will nodded.

“Do you miss your old one?”

“No,” he replied immediately. “That was a Jedi’s weapon, and I’m not a Jedi anymore, Mike. I don’t know what I am, really.”

“You’ve certainly got stronger,” Mike observed, and Will’s eyebrow twitched.

“It’s hardly surprising. It’s been about as long since we last saw each other, as it had been since we first met each other.” Mike took a moment to process what he meant by this, and realised he was right: Mykapo had been six years before Jakku, and here they were, six years on. Twelve years since they had met, and they had spent half of it apart.

“Shit,” Mike breathed, and Will hummed an affirmative. There was another beat of quiet as Mike worked up the nerve to ask the question he’d been dreading. “Will you come back with us?”

Will met his gaze for the first time. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because my place is here, Mike,” he said shortly. “These people need me, you saw that tonight.”

“There’s a whole galaxy that needs you,” Mike protested. “There’s good you can do everywhere.”

Will shook his head. “I won’t abandon this planet, or its inhabitants.

This was never just a placeholder while I waited for you.” The words cut deep, and perhaps Will sensed this, because he sighed. “I’m sorry,” he said gently. “But you must understand I have a commitment here.”

“No, I actually don’t understand,” Mike said, suddenly angry. “We had a commitment to *each other*, Will, don’t you remember that? I’ve spent the last six years dreaming of seeing you again, damn it! Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

For the first time, Will hesitated. “I loved you once, Mike,” he said quietly. “But I lost you once, and I was forced to let you go once. I don’t believe I have the strength to do it again.”

“Then that’s the difference between us,” Mike said, standing up resolutely. “Because I lost you too, Will – but I never let you go.” Without another word, and not waiting for a reply, he climbed down the ladder and marched off.

Slow, rhythmic *thuds* echoed through the empty halls of the *Ebony Hawk*. Mike sat alone in the corner of his cabin, throwing a ball against the opposite wall and catching it as it bounced off the floor. Through the tiny porthole that was the room’s only window peeked the first light of morning, and he blinked as his eyes adjusted, having been sitting in near-darkness for the best part of an hour.

The sense of victory over the town’s attackers had been very short-lived – for Mike, anyway. The residents had thrown a celebration, with its protectors as their guests of honour, but although Max, Lucas and Dustin had stayed, Mike had not felt particularly jocular after his conversation with Will, and had slipped away, unnoticed.

His anger at Will had long faded, but now he was just left feeling immensely hurt, and saddened by Will’s unwillingness to even consider restarting their life together. In the five years between Scarif and Jakku, they had talked at length about what they would do after the war ended. Often they meant it; often it was just a way of escaping the horrors they were living through for a little while.

They had talked of leaving the New Republic fleet, and using their respective war pensions to buy a smallholding. Until the age of about fourteen, Mike had grown up in the lap of luxury, and Will had grown up with very little, and a small farm where they could make their own living, as well as trading, seemed a fair balance between the two worlds they were keen to escape.

They had never quite agreed upon a planet: Will favoured the Core Worlds, so as to be nearer to their friends and life in general, while Mike liked the idea of disappearing into the Outer Rim, where they would not be war heroes or rebels – just them.

How badly it had gone wrong. They had never considered marriage, agreeing that they were happy enough without it – but this, of course, meant that after Will's presumed death, Mike had received nothing but two weeks' compassionate leave. Furthermore, after leaving the New Republic, Mike had had no regular income, and the single pension he'd received had frittered away on ship repairs and hiring crews for low-paying jobs.

Mike leaned his head back against the wall and sighed. Even if Will had agreed to come away with them, what would they do? They had no money, Mike barely had his freedom, and neither of them was exactly keen to go back to working for the New Republic. Perhaps it was for the best after all.

A knock on his door disturbed his reflections, and Dustin entered and sat down opposite him.

"You disappeared fairly quickly," he said. Mike bounced the ball over to him; he caught it and threw it back. "What's up?"

"Will," he said quietly.

"You two talked it out?"

Mike nodded. "He doesn't want to leave."

Dustin blinked in surprise. "That's ridiculous," he said. "Of course he wants to leave!"

“He thinks he’s responsible for these people.”

“Well,” Dustin said thoughtfully, “I guess he kind of is.”

“Not helpful,” Mike scowled.

“Well, what do you want me to say, then?”

“I don’t know!” Mike threw up his hands in frustration, then buried his face in them. “I don’t know.”

“This might be a bad time to bring this up,” Dustin said slowly, “but there was something else I wanted to do on this trip before I go back.”

Mike snorted. “‘Trip’? What is this to you, a vacation?”

Dustin ignored him. “There are rumours flying around the New Republic high command.”

“You mean the Imperial fragment in the Unknown Regions?”

Dustin nodded. “Of course, there are Imperial fragments everywhere,” he said with a sigh. “It’s been chaos trying to keep track of them all. But this one seems different somehow.”

“Why?”

“Because no one is willing to talk about it,” Dustin said, looking at Mike with a strange look in his eyes. “Everyone I ask, every time I bring it up, someone loudly changes the subject or else steers me out of the room.”

“Nancy was the same,” Mike said thoughtfully, “when Max and I mentioned it.”

“I’m sure the New Republic is hiding something,” Dustin said. “Or at least, there’s something they’re determined *not* to know about. ‘Ignorance is bliss’ and all that.”

“You want to go to the Unknown Regions,” Mike said. It was not a question.

“Not really,” Dustin said with a nervous laugh, “but I made a vow to protect the Rebellion, and the Republic that formed out of it. I think we have to.”

“We’?” Mike echoed, and Dustin grinned.

“You know I can’t do it without you guys.”

Mike drummed his fingers against the ball, deep in thought. “I think we’d struggle as the four of us. I think we’d need at least Will – ideally El too.”

“I thought Will made it clear he wouldn’t come?”

“He might,” Mike said, “with a proper incentive.”

They made a show of leaving; they bid a warm farewell to the marshal and the townspeople, and a more cordial one to Will, who rather ominously instructed them not to come back. Mike had a horrible feeling he already suspected what they planned to do.

This done, they took off, and circled the planet once to allow time for the sun to set on the little island. Dustin, who rarely saw the outside of the *Serendipity* these days, spent much of the time looking down at the planet from the turret dome, and later reported with some alarm that he had just seen a creature the size of a small country breach the surface of the waters.

They flew low as the sun started setting, landing far enough away from Will’s dwelling so as not to be detected. It had been agreed that Mike and Lucas should go alone: of the four of them, Mike was deemed the most likely to win Will over, and Lucas was the best equipped to take Will on if things turned nasty. Max and Dustin would remain with the ship, ready to extract them if necessary.

They travelled the last couple of miles on the two speeder bikes that Mike and Max had ‘found’ over the course of their travels, slowing to a stop at the foot of a path into the mountains.

“You sure about this?” Lucas asked doubtfully.

“Absolutely,” Mike said firmly. “You know how important this is. Without Will, we needn’t bother trying.”

“You’re the boss,” Lucas said, still sounding apprehensive.

They started up the path in silence, making a point of not looking at each other as they passed a row of skulls on spikes (with a single addition that, judging the state of decay, was clearly more recent). Clearly Will did not want to be disturbed.

“You still sure?” Lucas hissed, but Mike didn’t answer.

Presently, they reached a clearing with a large cave. Will’s voice, cold and distant, echoed across the hillside.

“I told you not to come back.”

“We had to!” Mike shouted, unsure where Will was, and if he could hear them. “We need your help!”

“I told you, I’m not leaving,” Will replied from somewhere behind him, and Mike whirled around, trying to glimpse him through the thickening mist. “Not for you, not for anything.”

“It’s about the Empire,” Lucas called, and there was a pause before Will replied.

“What about the Empire?”

He was, at least, listening to them, and in that moment, Mike dared to hope. “There’s a fragment in the Unknown Regions.” His voice was shaking. “The New Republic is determined to keep something quiet, and we need to find out why.”

“I’m not playing politics.” The coolness returned to Will’s voice. “I will not join you.”

Mike heard a hiss behind him, and instinctively seized his electrostaff from his shoulder, holding it up to his face as he spun around. Sparks flew from its galvanised surface as it met Will’s crossed lightsabers,

bearing down on him with enough strength to force Mike to stumble back a few feet. He bared the staff again as Will renewed his attack, and Will didn't seem at all surprised when Mike parried several consecutive blows.

After all, they had done this many times before, throughout their time together. Friendly sparring competitions had broken up the monotony of stakeouts and long cargo hauls, and although Will had an extra lightsaber, his moves had fundamentally not changed much. In fact, Mike felt a bizarre sense of déjà vu.

The roar of a jetpack filled the air, and Lucas' fist connected with Will's head. As Will recoiled, Lucas kicked him hard in the back of the calf, and Will sunk to one knee, his lightsabers carving scorch marks into the rock. Still airborne, Lucas launched his cable trap, which coiled tightly around Will, pinning his arms to his sides, and fired a concussion shot to disorient him.

"He doesn't need to see!" Mike shouted, but it was too late – Will was already back on his feet, and twisted his body to yank sharply on the taut cable. Lucas jerked forwards, his flight pattern thrown, as Will spun one saber in his hand and sliced through the cable.

Lucas, apparently starting to panic, used his momentum to body-slam Will in mid-air. He succeeded in throwing Will backwards, but Will dug his diamond-white blades into the rock to act as a brake, before holding up a hand to block the wall of fire pouring from Lucas' flamethrower, absorbing enough of its energy to launch Lucas away from him.

Lucas recovered with a fast 180-degree turn, drawing both blasters and unleashing a barrage down on Will.

"Don't hurt him!" Mike yelled, but he needn't have bothered: Will's blades whirled and slashed, and not a single blaster bolt met its mark.

As if to prove a point, he actually deactivated one saber and clipped it to his belt again, continuing to protect himself from Lucas' barrage with just one. Eventually, he seemed to grow bored of the game, and swung his lightsaber in a devastatingly fast arc, deflecting one sole shot back at Lucas' head. His armour held true, of course, but with an

echoing ring, the blaster bolt connected with Lucas' helmet with such speed and force that it blasted the helmet off his head entirely.

It spun in mid-air and disappeared into the canyon, and as Lucas dived for it, Will turned his attention back to Mike, and reignited his second lightsaber.

"I told you not to come back," Will said again, sounding sad for the first time. Yellow light glowed at each end of his electrostaff, and he raised it once more as Will's blades bore down on him. The three weapons locked, but Will's strength was rapidly overpowering him, pushing his staff back down towards his chest. Five seconds' contact, Mike knew, would be enough to stop his heart for good.

"Will." His voice was like a whisper over the intense humming of Will's lightsabers. "We need you." Mike looked into his tired, deadened eyes, and silently pleaded for Will to see him. "I... I need you."

A moment passed. The electrostaff was inches from his torso, and Mike braced himself; at least it would be quick. As he accepted the end, he looked into Will's hazel eyes one last time, wanting them to be the last thing he saw.

"Will... please."

The eerie white glow of his lightsabers still glinted in the irises, but... something looked different. They were wider, and his brow was not as furrowed. Mike met his gaze, and saw that his eyes were misting over: six years of torment, pain, loneliness, and bitterness, manifesting themselves in a single tear running down Will's cheek.

The pressure against his electrostaff eased, and the air fell silent as Will's weapons shrank away.

"Will?" Mike said tentatively, and there was a clatter as two lightsaber hilts dropped to the rocky ground.

"Mike," he whispered, shaking from head to foot.

"It's okay," Mike replied gently, hardly daring to believe it, taking a brave step forwards. "It's okay." Will stood, frozen to the spot, as

Mike wrapped his arms around him, holding him tightly against his chest. He felt Will bury his head into his shoulder, and muffling the howl of misery that was nearly choking him. "I've got you," Mike whispered. "I've got you." He rubbed his back gently as Will sobbed against him, and blinked away his own tears of mingled pain and relief.

Finally he felt Will pull away, and he stooped down to retrieve his lightsabers for him. Will smiled gratefully and clipped them to his belt, and wiped his eyes.

"I can't come with you," he said, but this time, the words didn't make Mike nearly as angry. These were words spoken from a place of love, not stubborn, obstinate duty. "I made a promise to these people. You could stay too," he added earnestly, and Mike smiled sadly.

"I made a promise too," he said quietly. "I promised the New Republic I would deliver my report on the incident here, and I promised Dustin I'd help him with his investigation."

Will nodded. "I understand." He paused a moment. "Will you come back after?"

"Will, we can't do this without you," Mike said desperately. "If you don't come, we can't even afford to try."

Before Will could speak again, the sound of a blaster split the air, and a ring of blue light enveloped Will. His face froze in shock as he slumped to the ground, stunned. Lucas stood over him, his helmet held in one hand and a hard look of determination on his face.

"What did you do that for?" Mike shouted. "He'd changed his mind, he wasn't going to hurt us!"

"He wasn't going to come with us either," Lucas countered. "Like you said – we can't do this without him. So if he doesn't want to come, we won't make him choose."

"So now what?" Mike asked angrily. "We... we, what, kidnap him?"

“Let’s get him back to the speeders,” Lucas said, and Mike noticed he hadn’t actually answered his question. “And take his lightsabers. He might well be back to his old self, but there’s no telling how he’ll react when he realises what we’ve done.”

“What *you’ve* done, more like,” Mike muttered, stooping down and hauling Will’s unconscious form gently onto his shoulder.

“Whatever,” shrugged Lucas, unclipping Will’s lightsabers from his belt and connecting them to his own.

“Well,” Mike said crossly, as they started down the mountain path, “you’d better hope this is worth it in the end.”

“Don’t worry,” Lucas replied confidently. “It will.”

4. XVI

Summary for the Chapter:

With the team reunited, the *Ebony Hawk's* crew resolves to raid an old base, in preparation for their investigation of the Imperial fragment in the Unknown Regions.

A faint buzzing plagued Will's inner ears; a common enough side effect of being stunned, but irritating nonetheless. Especially since, on this occasion, he was pretty sure he'd been stunned by someone who used to be one of his best friends. Literal insult to literal injury.

He shifted his weight awkwardly, for he was lying on one of his arms, and it had gone numb. Suddenly he stopped moving, as he became aware that this was not the rudimentary bunk that folded down from the internal wall of the TIE Reaper. This bed was comfortable, and familiar. Come to think of it, so was the room he was in. So was the whine of the engines somewhere below. This wasn't his decrepit Reaper. This was Mike's cabin on the *Ebony Hawk*. They'd kidnapped him.

The *bastards*.

Will tried to jump down from the bunk, but stumbled and found himself on the floor. Only then did he realise why his arm – both arms, actually – were riddled with the awful sensation of pins and needles: he was being restrained, by a pair of handcuffs emanating a soft magenta glow. He reached into the Force to try and disarm them, but felt dizzy, and he promptly keeled over again.

So, they were designed to limit the power of Force-wielders. Wonderful. Probably Mandalorian, judging the design and function. No matter: he'd fight his way off the ship with his bare hands if he had to. Will struggled to his feet again, and issued a swift, decisive kick to the cabin door.

"Mike!" shouted an alarmed voice from outside (belonging to Lucas, unless he was very much mistaken). "He's awake!"

The door slid sleekly open, and a repulsor blast pushed Will back across the room, where he landed unceremoniously on the lower bunk. He righted himself, and saw Mike and Lucas looking warily down at him.

“There’s no point in running,” Lucas said. “We’re already in hyperspace.”

“Take me back,” he said, his voice dangerously low. “Take me *back!*”

“We will,” Mike said quickly. “But not yet.”

“Where are my lightsabers?” Will demanded. “Where *are* they, Michael?” He stood up again, but Lucas raised a fist and a wall of air pushed him back down again.

“You can have them back once we’re sure you won’t kill us,” Lucas said cautiously, and Will let out a guttural groan of frustration.

“We’re sorry,” Mike said, crouching down to look Will in the eyes. “*I’m* sorry. But this is too important to ignore, and we need you with us. Once we’re done, we’ll take you back to Rishaani if you want, I swear.” Mike seemed to hesitate a moment, then rested a hand on Will’s knee. He resisted the urge to pull away. “I swear.”

Will sighed, realising he was beaten. “Fine.”

“We brought you a peace offering,” Mike said tentatively. “If you agree to follow me, I’ll take off the handcuffs.”

Will was a little suspicious, but nodded, so Mike pressed a button on the restraints, and they fell to the floor with a clatter. Will briefly considered overpowering them and commandeering the ship... but no. They needed his help, and if the mission was really as important as Mike was saying, he couldn’t exactly ignore it in any good conscience. Besides, after everything they’d been through over the years, he probably owed Mike a favour or two.

He followed Mike and Lucas out of the cabin, and his eyebrows twitched curiously as they led him to the hatch which led to the engine room. Traditionally, this had always been Dustin's domain, so Will was struggling to conceive why they were taking him there. Nonetheless, he climbed down after them, and gasped as an over-excited astromech droid collided with his legs, warbling away with his characteristic low, clunky whistles.

"Chester!" he exclaimed, stooping down to examine the little droid. "I don't understand... how?" He rested an arm on the still-chuntering droid and looked up at Mike in bewilderment.

"We went back for him," Mike said with a shrug.

"I've been fixing him up," added Dustin, who had exchanged his uniform for a boiler-suit. "Along with a few other repairs Mike's neglected over the last few years."

"I don't know what to say," Will said quietly, running a hand fondly over Chester's half-domed head. "Thank you." The three of them shrugged like it was nothing, and Will stood up and straightened his tunic. "To business, then?"

"To business," Mike echoed, and started up the ladder. "The problem is," he went on as they wandered down the hallway into the cockpit, "I don't think we have what we need to conduct this investigation."

"Like what?"

"Disguises, weapons, that sort of thing."

"We're about to drop out of hyperspace," Max called as they entered. "Better take a seat."

"So what's the plan?" Will sat down in one of the passenger seats as Mike joined Max in the pilots' seats.

"We're going to infiltrate an Imperial outpost," Max said gleefully. "Should be just like old times – but easier, because there aren't as many Imperials."

"Oh, good," Will said, without enthusiasm.

“We’ve enlisted some help,” Mike said; Will noticed with trepidation that there was a worrying sense of caution in his tone.

“Who?”

Mike didn’t get a chance to answer before an alarm started to beep; Will’s eyes darted to the scanner, but Max was ahead of him. “Incoming ship – Y-wing class.”

“Allow her to dock,” Mike said, spinning in the chair and pressing a few controls. Will raised an eyebrow.

The ship rocked gently as the heavy starfighter attached to one side of the *Ebony Hawk*, and from somewhere in the lower levels of the ship, the airlock hissed. An excited yell followed – Dustin, Will supposed – then Will heard footsteps in the hallway. He turned his head to the cockpit door, although he did not really need to. After all, he sensed the visitor’s presence through the Force flowing through the ship, and it was a presence he recognised instantly – but there was something unfamiliar too.

“El,” he said quietly, standing and offering her a courteous nod. In response, his former teacher and friend stepped closer to him and wrapped him in a tight hug. “Oh, okay,” he added with a soft chuckle. “We’re good, I take it.”

“Of course we’re good, I missed you,” she said fiercely. “I looked for you for months, where have you *been*?”

“Long story,” he replied wryly. “What’s new with you?”

“I’ve been working with the new Jedi Academy,” she said. “I mostly travel around, seeking out new Force-sensitives, but...” She stepped to one side, revealing a young Tholothian girl of thirteen or fourteen, Will estimated. The girl smiled shyly at them, the light catching the aqua patches on her dark skin as she looked at each of them in turn.

“Oh,” he said, unsure what to say, as she shook hands with Mike and Max.

"You must be Will," she said, inclining her head a little. "I'm Djenna. Master El's told me about you."

"Has she indeed?" he replied amicably, tilting his head. "I'm flattered."

"Djenn," El said abruptly, "why don't you go and see if Dustin needs any help?"

"Sure," she said placidly. "Nice to meet you all," she added, before turning on her heel and bouncing out.

"She seems pleasant enough."

El quirked an eyebrow at Will's words. "She's only been with me for about six months. We're having a little trouble connecting."

"How come?" Mike asked. Max pushed a lever forward, and the *Ebony Hawk* lurched into motion again.

"To tell you the truth, I don't think she wanted to get me as her teacher," El said helplessly. "She thinks I don't trust her, and she can be headstrong to the point of stubborn. I know she likes machines though, that's why I sent her to see Dustin."

"I see you've let her build her own lightsaber," Will remarked, unable to resist. "About six months too early, compared with your last record." Mike let out a laugh which he quickly suppressed, and Max bit her lip.

"Really?" she said, arching an eyebrow. "How long has it been, and you're not over it?"

"Oh, come on, I'm kidding!" He held up his hands in surrender, and she rolled her eyes good-naturedly.

"I have..." She paused to consider her words. "...refined my teaching techniques since then. I was not the best teacher back then, I freely admit it."

"Nor I the best student," Will replied with a sheepish chuckle.

"I hope to do better by Djenna, but..." She tailed off, then shook her head. "It's difficult to see into the future at the moment. Makes me wonder." Will wasn't quite sure how to respond to this, but she saved him the trouble. "Would you consider coming back? You know, to teach with us?" she asked, a little cautiously, but Will shook his head.

"I'm not a Jedi," he said flatly. "Wouldn't exactly make a lot of sense for me to teach younglings how to be one."

"Well, if you're sure." Her tone seemed neutral, but Will sensed this was not the end of the conversation. "Where exactly is it we're going?"

"The Brun'Eth system," Max replied. "There's an old facility operating on a skeleton crew."

"Sounds familiar," Mike said drily.

"What kind of facility?" El asked, bundling her arms in her cloak and folding them across her chest.

"Our best guess is troop training." Mike reached up and pressed a button on the ceiling controls as he answered.

"Which suits us," Max added, "because it'll have weapons, armour and uniforms, but won't be too heavily defended."

The plan was a simple one: after finding an empty hangar (or, failing that, a landing pad) and splitting into groups to minimise the risk of detection, each one of them would find and steal a suitable disguise, as well as an Imperial-issue weapon, and some identification cylinders, if possible. It was agreed early that Lucas would steal an officer's uniform, as his regular usage of a helmet meant that his face was the least recognisable. Max pointed out that there was no way El's new Padawan would pass as a stormtrooper, so Will suggested finding a cadet's uniform and giving it to Djenna to wear. The first group to finish their task would return to a hangar and find a shuttle to steal; the others would then reconvene on the *Ebony Hawk*, and they'd run for it.

“With any luck,” Mike said with uncharacteristic positivity, “we’ll be in and out before they realise anything’s happened.”

As they entered the atmosphere and approached the base, their cautious optimism only increased: there were no ships, so speeder bikes or tanks patrolling. To all intents and purposes, the facility seemed abandoned.

“Don’t know why you were so worried,” Dustin said, nudging Will playfully in the ribs. “We’ll be done in less than an hour, by the look of things.” Will didn’t answer.

The base was set into a sheer ice cliff, and as they approached an unoccupied landing platform, the ship rocked with the strength of the wind. Flurries of snow swirled around the cockpit windows, making it difficult to see, and they landed with rather less grace than Mike and Max were capable. Mike grimaced an apology, and Will smirked as he slid his arms into the sleeves of his poncho and pulled the hood up over his head.

Walking through the near-blizzard was surprisingly difficult, and they had to lean into the wind to avoid being blown over. Mike shouted something as they drew near the base, but his voice was lost in the gale, and Will couldn’t work out what he’d said. Presently, they reached the canopy protecting the blast doors, and Djenna got to work, slicing into the control panel and pressing a couple of wires together until they slid open.

They raised their blasters instinctively, but the hallways were silent.

“Don’t like that,” said Max bluntly. “Makes you wonder what they *are* guarding.”

“Maybe it’s abandoned,” Djenna suggested, but El shook her head.

“Generators are running, listen,” she said, and sure enough, there was a faint buzz of engine power running through the core of the base. The humming sound was presently accompanied by footfalls, and a lone stormtrooper rounded a corner.

“Hey, what are you doing he—AHHH!” she shouted, her demand slurring into a yell as she was lifted off his feet and dragged, seemingly unbidden, through the air. She slammed into the side of the *Ebony Hawk* and slumped to the ground, unconscious. As the others turned their heads in alarm, Will lowered his hand and stooped down to remove the trooper’s helmet and armour.

“What?” he asked innocently.

“Here’s a thought,” Lucas murmured to Dustin, “let’s not piss him off again.”

“Max,” Will interrupted, tossing her the helmet. “This one’s for you.” She nodded and twisted her hair up into a bun, before donning the helmet.

“Important question,” Dustin said thoughtfully, “how are we going to avoid shooting each other?”

“Because we’re planning not to shoot anyone, dung-brain,” Max said, her voice muffled by the helmet.

“But when do any of our plans go exactly as we want them to?” Dustin countered, quite reasonably.

“Relax,” Mike said, making a minor adjustment on Max’s armour. “Try to blend in. After all, if anyone challenges you, it won’t be one of us.”

They split into three groups, and stole away down different corridors. Max seized Mike and made a pretence of escorting a prisoner until they found an officer, at which point a blur of white light curved through the air from behind a pillar. Mike gingerly picked up the officer’s hat from the floor as the head rolled away.

In Mike’s considered opinion, it was profoundly unnerving how effectively Will was able to conceal himself from view. He’d noticed it before when he and Lucas had sought him out in the hills of Rishaani, but it was even more noticeable now, in the brightly-lit, sparsely-decorated corridors of the old Imperial base. He seemed to

be able to manipulate any shadow, the slightest obstacle, and would simply disappear from sight. It was bizarre: even when Mike knew exactly where he was hiding, he just couldn't force his gaze to rest on that particular spot, and his eyes would drift away unbidden.

Occasionally, when Will changed position, Mike could catch a glimpse of him; just the corner of his poncho or a glint of metal reflecting the overhead lights, but by the time he turned to look, Will had vanished again. It left him feeling more than a little uneasy, and judging the way Max kept looking around, it had the same effect on her.

Mike slipped behind a pillar to change into the dead officer's uniform, then they made their way to the computer terminals. Fortunately, Mike's uniform had an identification capsule, giving them unfettered access to the base's systems – assuming, of course, that the officer's body hadn't already been located. To Mike's relief, though, the system let him in, and he scanned a map of the base, looking for an occupied hangar. Having located it, he nodded to the corner of the room where he knew Will to be, so that he could convey to the rest of the team that they were done, and would man the stolen shuttle.

As they made their way nonchalantly towards the hangar, Mike couldn't help but feel a mounting sense of dread. Before they'd left, the team had agreed not to communicate using their usual channels except for emergencies, but still, the radio silence felt strange.

"You're tensing up," hissed Max. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," he muttered back. "I just... I have a bad feeling about this."

"About what?"

"Just... this! The plan," he said, struggling to convey exactly what he was thinking. "I feel like we overcomplicated things."

"It'll be fine," Max said dismissively. "I know we're not normally this

subtle on heist jobs, but the ships have to be intact. We need the disguises so that they don't shoot us down before we can escape."

"Yeah, I know."

The silence that followed was broken by a shrill alarm, resounding down the corridor and reverberating off the walls. Mike and Max tensed as a squadron of troopers flocked out of a recreation hall, but they paid them no heed and stormed instead down the corridor behind them.

"Alert. There are intruders onsite. Find and detain them. Shoot to kill."

"Oh, no," Mike whispered, lifting his wrist-comm to his lips. "All Jets – retreat. Get back to the *Hawk*."

"Negative," said Lucas' voice, sounding uncharacteristically desperate. *"They've impounded it."*

"What?!"

"Chester," Will gasped, speaking for the first time from his hidden position.

"We've got him," Dustin replied, *"he got out before they reached the ship. We're heading for the other hangar. Meet you there."*

Without hesitating, they broke into a run, with Max shouting directions at intervals. They skidded to a stop at the end of a long corridor, quickly reversing back around the corner as blaster-fire peppered the opposite wall.

"What do we do?" Mike asked desperately, and as quickly as he'd vanished, Will appeared in front of them, one lightsaber ignited and a grim expression on his face. He spun the blade in his hand and scored a hole into the ceiling; the piece he'd carved out dropped to the floor with a clang, making them jump.

"Ventilation shafts," he said shortly. "Tight fit, but they won't find you in there. I'll create a diversion and meet you at the hangar." He

turned away, but Mike grabbed his hand.

“Be safe,” he said softly, and the corners of Will’s mouth twitched upwards.

“You too.” With that, he disappeared from view again, as with cat-like agility, Max jumped up and hauled herself into the shaft.

“Mike, come on!” She reached down and seized his hand, and Mike used the momentum to walk sideways up the wall and follow her into the vent. She collapsed backwards as he pulled himself through, breathing heavily. “For someone so skinny, you’re not exactly light,” she grumbled, and he scowled at her.

“Let’s get this over with.” Below, the blaster-fire persisted, but the sound was interspersed with the intermittent buzz of lightsabers, and the shouts of the Imperial soldiers as they fell to Will’s blades. Max shrugged off her armour for greater manoeuvrability as they twisted and turned through the narrow vents. “How do we know where we are?” he asked, and Max grunted as she used her truncheon like a jack to bend a pipe obstructing their route.

“I downloaded the map to my wrist-comm. Should lead us right there.” She helped him scramble through the narrow gap, dropping to a crawl as it grew narrow again. Mike was aware they were probably making a fair amount of noise, but he was relying on the pandemonium Will was causing below to divert attention away from them.

Suddenly Mike’s wrist-comm crackled, and El’s voice sounded through. “Mike, *the rest of us are at the hangar, where are you?*”

“On our way!” His voice nearly cracked as he strained to slide between the metal joints of the ventilation shaft. “Did you get a shuttle?”

“*Working on it.*” He heard a lightsaber hum over the intercom, then El spoke again. “*I don’t know how long we’ll be able to hold it, though.*”

“Don’t worry, we’ll be there.” Suddenly Max let out a small scream: a white plasma blade had just seared through the shaft, and they

watched as it cut a circle into the durasteel to give them a way out. Max dropped down, and Mike followed suit, unable to stop himself from hugging Will in relief.

“Come on,” Will said, “The hangar’s just ahead.” He led them down the empty corridor, waving a hand at the sealed blast door.

Mayhem reigned in the hangar. Blaster bolts were flying in all directions, with stormtroopers shooting blindly at both the crew and each other, unable to tell their comrades from the impostors. They slipped past with relative ease, such was the level of the chaos, to where Dustin was waving from the cockpit of a shuttle. Will ducked to dodge a stray blaster bolt, and slammed a hand on the ramp controls, as the shuttle lifted into the air.

At this point, the stormtroopers caught on and turned their blasters on the shuttle, but it was too little, too late. The craft let out a hum as El brought the shields online, and Will, Mike, and Max collapsed into chairs in the cockpit.

“I can’t believe we got away with that,” Lucas remarked, and Mike looked gloomily out of the window.

“We didn’t quite,” he replied quietly.

“I’m sorry about the *Hawk*,” Will said, leaning over to rest a hand on Mike’s knee. “I know what it meant to you.”

“Finest ship in the world,” Mike replied, then turned to Chester. “Did you bring it?” Chester chuntered to the effect that technically he was no longer Mike’s droid and was not required to obey him, and Mike rolled his eyes. “So you didn’t?” As Dustin guided the shuttle out of the hangar, the droid popped open a compartment, and a small portable trigger button rolled out.

“What’s that?” Djenna piped up, and Mike smiled sadly.

“That ship’s decades old,” he said, turning the trigger over in his hands. “There’s far too much intel on its hard drive, and the Empire’s not getting hold of it.” He held his thumb over the trigger and

pressed it hard.

Immediately, the shuttle rocked from the blast that had gone off behind them, and Dustin had to twist the throttle to bring it back under control. He turned the shuttle, bringing the base back into view; a massive cloud of smoke and flames were pouring out of the base, and falling with the heavy snow were scraps of the ship they had once called home. A respectful silence fell over the group as they contemplated how much their heist had cost them.

“This had better be worth it,” Mike said gruffly, and Will hesitated only a moment before reaching for his hand, looking pointedly away as Mike surreptitiously wiped his eyes.

“We’ll make it worth it,” he replied, his voice low with determination. “I promise.”

“We’re set to jump to lightspeed,” Dustin said after a few minutes. “Course set – the Unknown Regions.” As ever, the stars around them lengthened, the ebony blanket of space turned sapphire, and the swirling vortex of hyperspace enveloped the little vessel and its band of fighters.

“Nice job,” El said, relaxing visibly in her seat. “I suggest we get some sleep.”

“Agreed,” Dustin said, flicking a switch to engage the ship’s autopilot. “It’ll be a good few hours before we re-enter realspace. Might as well rest up.”

“Are there bunks?” Djenna asked doubtfully.

“There’s a small medical bay in the belly of the ship,” Dustin replied. “Should be some makeshift beds there.”

As it turned out, there were only five, so Mike and Will volunteered to sleep in the cockpit’s flight chairs, and found themselves alone for the first time since they’d sat on the wall together after the battle on Rishaani.

“You think we’re ready for this?” Mike asked.

“No,” Will said absently, gazing at the opposite wall. “But we manage, don’t we?”

Mike hummed an affirmative. “Sorry about... you know. Kidnapping you. It was Lucas, really.”

“It’s fine.” Mike sensed he had more to say, so he stayed quiet. “When all’s said and done, you were probably right.”

“Really?”

“It was unreasonable to insist on protecting one planet when there’s a whole galaxy that needs help,” he mused. “But truth be told, I still consider it my home, and I do want to go back.”

“Of course.”

“But to say I was *never* leaving... that was just me being obstinate.”

Mike dared to smile. “What about us?” he asked tentatively. “Are we okay?”

Will rolled his head sleepily to one side and met Mike’s gaze. “Yeah, we’re good.” Mike rested his hand on the arm of his seat, and Will rested his own on top, lacing their fingers together. “We’ll get there, anyway.”

The next thing Mike knew was that he was being shaken awake, and Will’s hazel eyes were looking earnestly into his own. “We’re here,” he said gently, and Mike rubbed his eyes. The others were filing in, and Dustin had taken his seat in the pilot’s chair.

“Dropping out of hyperspace in five... four... three... two... one...” The hyperspace vortex vanished in a blink, and Dustin swerved to avoid the asteroid field they were approaching. “That was close,” he said nervously. “A nanosecond later...”

“That’s what happens when you go places that don’t have hyperspace

lanes,” Lucas said grimly. “It was always a risk, coming here.”

“So where’s the Empire?” Max asked, leaning between their seats and peering out of the viewing window.

“No idea,” said Dustin with a frown. “We’re in uncharted territory now.”

“Let me steer,” said El suddenly. “The Force will guide us.” Dustin and Lucas exchanged a glance and shrugged.

“Sure.”

“Can I help?” Djenna asked eagerly, and El smiled at her student.

“Of course. In fact...” She tailed off and gestured to the pilot’s chair, before sitting down in the co-pilot’s seat. “Following your lead.”

Master and apprentice guided the shuttle between the small moons which signalled the entrance to the Unknown Regions in near-perfect synchronisation. Mike kept glancing at Will, who was sat in one of the passenger seats with his eyes closed.

“You okay?” he asked tentatively, and Will nodded slowly.

“We’re almost there,” he murmured, and sure enough, suddenly Djenna pointed out of the viewing window.

“Look,” she said urgently. “Star destroyers.”

She wasn’t wrong, but as she spoke, it occurred to everyone onboard that the star destroyers alone were the least of their concerns. They numbered in their dozens, far surpassing the New Republic’s estimation of the Empire’s military strength. Most troubling of all, though, was what they seemed to be protecting; they were slowly orbiting a small, icy planet, which looked for all the world as though it was being taken apart, piece by piece.

5. XVII

Summary for the Chapter:

Reunited for the first time in six years, and having finally arrived at the Empire's new base of operations in the Unknown Regions, the team conduct an unconventional reconnaissance mission, determined to tell the New Republic what's going on.

Notes for the Chapter:

I spent two months having no idea how to fill this chapter, then wrote 9000 words in less than a week. You know how it is. Hope it's worth the wait (for what it's worth, this might be my favourite chapter in the series)!

“What the hell..?” Lucas breathed, his hands sliding from the controls in disbelief. Silence hung in the cockpit; everyone was too bemused to speak. Will glanced at El, whose face was set in a frown, transfixed on the scene outside.

“You feel it too,” he said quietly. It wasn’t a question.

She nodded. “I know this place. But it’s...” She shook her head. “This isn’t what I expected. I think we need to split up.”

“When has that ever gone well?” Mike snapped, and Will grimaced at the truth of this; Mykapo, Fondor, Scarif – their closest calls had always come when the group was separated.

“We need to investigate the ships and the planet,” she said firmly, “but we haven’t got time to do both as a group, they’d find us.”

“They’ll find us anyway,” Will said doubtfully. “Security on a base this well-guarded is going to be tight.”

“Exactly,” El countered. “So we need to get as much done as we can before that happens.”

“What’s your plan, then?” Dustin swivelled his seat and crossed his arms across his chest.

The faintest suggestion of a smile flickered across El’s face. “Difficult to form a plan when we don’t know what we’re going to find.”

“Principle One, then?” Max suggested with a definite grin.

“Principle One?” Djenna repeated, puzzled, as a low chuckle escaped Will’s lips. “What’s that?”

Will could vividly remember the day they’d come up with Directive One, many years before. Or, more accurately, reassigned it: according to El, the ‘first principle’ of Jedi combat had been an unofficial Jedi maxim during the clone wars, instructing them to survive above all else. She had, on one occasion, pointed out the irony in this. Nevertheless, this motif had featured regularly in Will’s limited, unconventional training, until one day about three months before the Battle of Yavin, they had set out to rob an Imperial training facility.

It had been one of El’s more complex initiatives, entailing a week-long infiltration on Will’s part, with nightly briefings to the *Ebony Hawk*. After a conversation with Will at the end of the week, the commanding officer would mysteriously promote him and send him on a reconnaissance mission with, conveniently, the exact supplies the Rebellion needed.

This highly-detailed scheme, however, had fallen apart in approximately five minutes flat, because they had somehow failed to consider that Will would be given an Imperial-issue communicator, with only a local broadcast frequency. Cut off from the rest of the team, without a plan, without a lightsaber and without any assistance, Will had excelled in his first three weeks of Imperial flight training (mostly due to the fact that he’d done it all before), before staging a moderately successful uprising among his fellow students and escaping. Upon his return to Dantooine with eleven new rebels, Will had drily proposed that Principle One should take on a new meaning.

“Improvise,” El told Djenna, with a knowing look.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” her apprentice said doubtfully, fiddling with the hilt of the lightsaber on her belt and making a mental note to repair the loose connection.

“I believe that the Force wills us to survive this,” El said, squeezing Djenna’s shoulder to reassure her. “If I’m wrong, then so be it.”

“And on that cheerful note,” Lucas said abruptly, “we should make a move. We can’t sit here forever, or they’ll notice.”

“He’s right,” Mike piped up. “We should decide the teams.”

After much debate, it was agreed that El, Djenna, Max and Dustin would take an escape pod to the planet below, leaving Will, Mike and Lucas to board the star destroyer.

“This is a reconnaissance mission only,” Mike warned. “Don’t do anything crazy.”

“Don’t waste time,” Will advised, “but try not to rush about either. Blend in, act like you belong. We don’t want any trouble.”

Mike, Will and Lucas watched the escape pod as it drifted gently towards the planet’s surface, its thrusters powered down, clearly hoping to pass themselves off as space junk until they were in the atmosphere.

“Good luck,” Lucas murmured to no one in particular.

Mike, meanwhile, was tugging at the sleeves of the ill-fitting Imperial uniform he had stolen. In truth, stormtrooper armour would have been better-suited to Mike’s height, but they only had one set, and Dustin had very reasonably pointed out that an officer’s uniform would grant them better access inside a star destroyer than the armour of a lowly stormtrooper.

“That might fit me better,” Will remarked with a wry smile; the few inches Mike had on Will had always been a slightly sore point in their relationship.

“Yeah, but you can hide better than me, so you don’t need a disguise.” Mike hesitated a moment, then reached for Will with his free hand. Will considered it for only a second before lacing his fingers through Mike’s.

“At least you’ll stand out less than a Mandalorian.”

“I’m literally right here.” Will couldn’t read Lucas’ expression under the helmet, but he got the gist.

Predictably, the shuttle’s intercom crackled as they drew nearer the star destroyer.

“Here we go,” Lucas muttered and Mike activated the comms system.

“This is shuttle three-one-one-seven-four,” he said, dropping the usual energy present in his voice.

“Shuttle three-one-one-seven-four, you are not scheduled for arrival,” replied the technician on the other end of the line. “State your cargo and business.”

“Weapons and armour replenishments for the planet surface.” Silence greeted this pronouncement, and Mike screwed his eyes shut, but Will wasn’t worried. He could sense the Force’s movements around the cabin, and everything was going according to plan.

“You are cleared for landing. Set your course for hangar eight, and prepare for inspection.”

“Affirmative,” Mike said. “Shuttle out.”

Lucas pulled off his helmet and wiped a bead of sweat from his brow. “I have *not* missed this.”

“Yes, you have,” Will replied with a smirk, as Lucas tilted the ship

slightly to starboard. The colossal destroyer loomed ever closer, and presently they were swallowed by the enormous ray shields protecting the destroyer's eighth hangar.

They've redecorated, Mike observed silently, and it was true. Gone were the Empire's signature dull grey walls, floors and ceilings, replaced by sinister navy-coloured aurodium, punctuated by intimidating white lights. The clean white uniforms of the patrolling stormtroopers stood out even more starkly against the dark floors, and their sheer numbers made Mike shiver. Everything they'd done, every battle they'd fought, everyone they'd lost – had any of it mattered?

Chester let out a low whistle, abruptly halting Mike's thought process, informing the remaining crew that an inspection team was approaching. Lucas obediently lowered the ramp door, as Will once again seemed to vanish from view, as he had in the base where they'd stolen the shuttle. Mike barely had time to figure out what had happened before three muffled shouts echoed from the depths of the ship.

Will returned a few moments later with an innocent expression on his face. "They said we're clear to leave the shuttle."

"They said that?" Mike asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, not in so many words. I put the pieces together, though."

Lucas let out a harsh laugh and pulled his helmet back on. "*Really* hoping you're not being literal. Come on."

Compared with the echoing silence of the base they'd raided on Brun'Eth, the thrum of conversation, loudspeaker announcements and starship engines was almost comforting as they stepped off the shuttle. Mike and Lucas walked with purpose in the direction of the nearest corridor, having agreed that confidence would minimise their chances of drawing attention. Mike had no idea where Will was, but a blast door opened at their approach, which should have required an identification cylinder; clearly he hadn't gone far.

“Do we have a destination in mind?” Lucas asked in a low voice, and Mike shook his head.

“Just looking for a computer terminal.”

Although he couldn't prove it, Mike had a strong suspicion that Will's influence on their progress was greater than he was letting on. More than once, the door in front of them closed, forcing them to turn down a corridor. A passing trooper asked Mike where he was taking his prisoner, only to immediately congratulate him on his recent promotion and wander away again. At one point, he felt something tug gently on the sleeve of his flight jacket; there was nobody there, but when he turned to look, he noticed a holomap of the ship's sector set into the wall. It was more than a little unnerving.

It seemed as though they had been walking for miles when a door to their right slid open, and Mike glimpsed a black cloak in his field of vision, slipping, otherwise unseen, into the room. Mike followed and beckoned Lucas in, at which point Will reappeared alongside them and lowered the hood of his cloak.

“Hi,” he said, smiling up at Mike, as casually as if they were just meeting for a leisurely walk in the woods.

“Good to see you.” Mike wanted to take advantage of Will being outwardly friendly again, but they had an objective, which he was determined to fulfil. “Chester, can you – ” The little droid didn't even allow Mike to finish his request before letting out a loud, vulgar whistle to indicate that he didn't answer to Mike. Mike ground his teeth and turned to Will instead. “Will, please instruct your wastepaper basket to hook up to one of the terminals.”

“Come on, Ches,” Will said sternly; the droid chuntered something unintelligible, but dutifully trundled to the computer panel and inserted his data probe into a port. Will closed his eyes, reaching into the Force to sense the wires within the computer console, and tweak the sensors which would have alerted security to the presence of an unknown user. Really, it was just too easy sometimes.

“Found anything?” Mike asked, ignoring Chester's obscene response and turning to Lucas instead, who was using Mike's identification

cylinder to give them officer-level access.

"I've found a manifesto," Lucas said, sounding uncharacteristically subdued. "Most of it's redacted, though."

"But?" Mike prompted, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

"But it identifies the organisation the Empire's building." Will and Mike didn't dare ask. "They're calling themselves the First Order."

Despite Max's best efforts, the escape pod landed with a jolt, hard enough to throw them off their seats and collapse in a heap on the floor of the tiny vessel.

"Well, that was dignified," Dustin wheezed as they clambered out through the pod's little door and peered up at the sheer cliff walls which surrounded them. They had, it seemed, crashed in the pit of some sort of canyon. The river which had carved it must have frozen upstream at some point, Dustin figured, or they would have landed in it. "Who taught you how to drive?"

Max ignored him, instead unwinding a rope from around her middle and unclipping some climbing hooks from her belt. "I've only got two hooks," she said, weighing up their options. "Does anyone know how to free-climb up ice?"

"You and Dustin climb with the rope," El said confidently. "The Force will provide a path for us." Max wondered if El had failed to notice the sceptical expression on her Padawan's face, or whether she was simply choosing to ignore it.

"Not being funny," Dustin remarked, "but if the Force can provide a way up for you that doesn't involve climbing, can't it do the same for us? I can't speak for Max, but I would feel much happier if we were exploring this place with Jedi."

"Oh, don't be such a baby," Max said carelessly. "Besides, can't you take a hint? Clearly El wants to do Jedi stuff, let her go. Now tie this around your waist and shut up." Dustin did, although it was clear he didn't want to. "You'll be okay?" Max added, turning to El and

Djenna.

“Of course.” El’s voice was bright, and Djenna forced a brave smile. “We’ll meet you at the top. Stay out of trouble.”

She watched as Max started leading Dustin, still grumbling, up the side of the canyon wall, before wordlessly indicating to Djenna to follow her into a nearby cave.

“Where are we going?” Djenna asked, as El ignited her lightsaber and held it aloft. The ice walls reflected the deep sapphire light in every direction, giving the appearance of a myriad of tiny lights flickering in the walls.

“We need to find out where we are,” El said. “Until then, where we’re going isn’t really relevant.”

Djenna restrained herself from pointing out that El had offered nothing of any consequence to the conversation, and responded by reaching for her own blade to light their way in the dark tunnel. “Tell me, Djenna,” El added after they’d been walking for a few minutes. “What do you feel?”

“Cold,” she said drily, and El had the grace to smile.

“You know what I mean.”

“I can feel the Force strongly here,” she said after a moment’s introspection. “There is power here.” When El didn’t reply, Djenna continued, “I suspect we’re not the only Jedi here.”

“Oh, I think we are,” El said thoughtfully, “but your insights are interesting, and further my theory.” Djenna waited for her to elaborate, but she wasn’t surprised when no justification was offered. In the time she’d known El, she rarely explained her reasoning. Not to her, at any rate.

It wasn’t that Djenna didn’t like El. On the contrary, she liked her quite a lot: she admired her skill in the Force, the stories she told of the Rebellion, and the way she always seemed to choose kindness as

if the choice were obvious, whereas Djenna often found it difficult to be gracious towards her fellow students, a lot of whom were far too cocky for their own good, in her considered opinion.

Their path grew gradually wider, and began to climb; gently at first, then steeper until they were almost climbing. Despite El's gentle reproach, Djenna still couldn't help wondering where exactly they were headed.

The problem was that she never truly felt as though El liked *her*, and realistically there wasn't much she could do to disprove this intuition without openly accusing her master of disliking her. It didn't help that El wasn't especially talkative, and even when she was in a particularly good mood, they didn't have a lot to talk about. It put a strain on their relationship, which concerned Djenna, to say the least.

They walked in silence for about ten minutes before El spoke again. "The Force exists outside of time," she said quietly. "After all, it's the Force which is responsible for the passage of time, and it's not bound by it. When you said you thought there were other Jedi here, I don't think you were too far from the truth."

Suddenly, the tunnel walls vanished, and they stepped into an enormous cavern, the light from their weapons still bouncing off the jet black walls. "Whoa," Djenna breathed, lifting her lightsaber higher to increase her field of vision.

"You and I are, I believe, the only two Jedi on this planet. What you were sensing was most likely the thousands and thousands of Jedi who have passed through this planet's various tunnels and caverns."

"So where are we?" Djenna urged; El was being maddening.

"This, apprentice," El said, stooping down and pressing a hand to the ice, "is Ilum." Djenna felt this pronouncement wasn't quite having the impact El had anticipated, and perhaps El sensed this. "This planet used to be a place of pilgrimage for Jedi during the Old Republic. I came here myself when I was a youngling; it's where we found our kyber crystals. Or, more accurately, where they found us."

“Kyber crystals?” she echoed. “Like the one in my lightsaber?”

“Yes,” El said simply. “It was a rite of passage, one of a few undergone by Padawans before becoming a true Jedi. But with Ilum lost to the Empire, we’ve yet to find a new source of crystals, which is why the crystal in your lightsaber is synthetic.”

“What do the Empire want with Ilum?”

“Oh, they’ve been here for decades. I had an acquaintance during the time of the Rebellion who told me they’d taken over, and were harvesting the planet’s crystals. We didn’t know it then, but they would be used to power the energy weapon on both Death Stars.”

“So, if there are no more crystals,” Djenna said, “why is the Empire still here?”

“That,” El said, frowning up at the ceiling as it shook above them, “is a very good question.”

They had barely taken ten more steps when the ground beneath their feet began to tremble. “Master?” Djenna said nervously.

“Something’s coming,” El said, only the faintest trace of alarm detectable in her voice. “Get behind me. Feel the Force around you, and trust your instincts.”

Djenna had no time to reply before the cavern shook again, with almost enough force to knock them over. With a rumbling crash, the high ceiling caved in, and a massive creature tumbled through, its talons gripping the icy rock as massive chunks of ice tumbled into the chasms below. It stretched its bat-like wings, shook a few indigo feathers from its head and turned its bright black eyes on El and Djenna.

With a soft hiss, El ignited the second blade of her lightsaber, and Djenna gripped hers a little more tightly. “What do we do?”

“Nothing, unless it – ” El never got the chance to add the word ‘attacks’, because at that moment, the creature let out an ear-

shattering shriek and launched from its perch. "Aim for the eyes!" El shouted, but very unhelpfully, it wasn't offering its eyes. Instead, its taloned feet were opening, stretching its claws out towards them. El's lightsaber whirled through the air as they threw themselves out of its reach, but the creature pulled out of its dive with a mere burn mark running twelve inches down one of its toes, otherwise unscathed.

"So it's resistant to lightsaber blades," Djenna panted as she scrambled to her feet. "Wonderful."

"And judging the way it broke through the ceiling, it's got quite a hard head, so we can't hit it with the ice," El pointed out. "Djenna, come here." She joined her master at her side and followed her lead in sheathing her lightsaber. "I'm going to count down, and we're going to push. Three." The creature circled around in the cavern above them, and hovered for a moment. "Two." It screeched at them again, and folded its wings back. "One." It dropped like a stone, and Djenna drew her hand back. "*Now!*"

They thrust their hands forward, each drawing on the energy flowing through them, mentally whispering to the air particles around them to nudge the creature off course. It veered to the right and smashed through the ice wall, but this created a new problem. They had apparently hit some kind of lake or reservoir, and frigid water gushed through the hole, threatening to wash them into the chasms. El closed her eyes and twisted her hands through the air, tearing chunks of rock and ice from the cliffsides.

As the flash flood drew nearer, the rocks sailed through the stale air and slammed into the wall, neatly plugging the hole the creature had left, slowing the deluge to a slow trickle. The initial wave was still oncoming, though, so Djenna held out her hands. Although she could not work out how to lift and manipulate the water in the way El would be able to, she was strong enough in the Force to stop its advance, redirecting it to flow over the edge of the cliffs instead of towards them.

"Well done," El said, wiping her wet hands on the hem of her robes. "Now, we need to run."

"But what about the creature?" Djenna said as they broke into a jog.

“Will it drown?”

“For its own sake, I hope not,” El said, vaulting across the gap she had made between the cliffs. “Jump. But,” she added once Djenna had crossed, “we can’t defeat it or control it, and if we let it, it will eat us, so we need to get out of here. The Force will guide us.”

The ground continued to shake as the creature pounded furiously against El’s makeshift dam, but Djenna dared not look back. El was right – they couldn’t help it and survive, it just wasn’t possible. A loud crash echoed around the chamber, and her heart sank: it had broken through. El immediately halted, and plunged her lightsaber blade into the wall to their right. “Help me,” she said, but Djenna had anticipated this, and was already igniting her own sapphire blade.

As the beating of the creature’s wings drew nearer, El clenched a fist to shatter the circle they’d cut. They dived into the hidden tunnel extending through the ice wall, milliseconds before the creature’s beak closed on the space they’d been standing in. It let out a shriek of anger and snapped a few times at the tunnel opening, perhaps hoping to crack the wall open to reveal its prey, but the ice held true as El and Djenna sprinted away, waiting until they’d rounded a corner to illuminate the tunnel with their lightsabers.

“You did well back there,” El said, leaning against a wall as she recovered her breath. “I’m proud of you, Djenn.”

“Thank you,” Djenna said, masking her surprise at the genuine compliment. “That was good thinking about this tunnel.”

El allowed herself a wry smile. “As peculiar as the phrasing sounds, Jedi don’t think. We feel; we sense; we let the Force guide us. The Force led us to this tunnel, Djenna, not me. I simply listened.”

Djenna nodded; naturally quite a logical person, it was a lesson she often struggled to retain. “Do we go on, then?”

“Yes, absolutely. We need to find Max and Dustin again, and hope the others are on their way to come and get us.”

“So... why did we come down here again?” Djenna asked tentatively.

“Surely it wasn’t just for you to remember it was Ilum.”

“No,” El said, suddenly contemplative. “Maybe there is another purpose for us being here. Try not to focus on it. Until the possible becomes actual...”

“...it is merely a distraction. I know.”

The cave walls were beginning to narrow, and they had to struggle through, wriggling and clambering through smaller gaps in order to pass.

“If only,” Djenna gasped at one point, “we had some kind of tool or weapon which could cut through ice.”

“We don’t know how much the cliff’s structural integrity relies on these pieces,” El replied, ignoring the sarcasm. “The last thing we need is to make one wrong cut and have the whole tunnel cave in.” Djenna reluctantly conceded the point, but an unplaceable sense of foreboding fell over her as she stepped out into the next stretch of the passage. A loud crack echoed around the tunnel walls, and Djenna let out a yell of alarm as the floor gave way underfoot, and she plummeted through the floor.

“The First Order,” Mike mused, drumming his fingers thoughtfully on the computer console. “That’s kind of pretentious. Is there anything else?”

Lucas clicked his tongue and shook his head. “They’ve improved their security since Endor, it looks like even Chester can’t get in.”

“What’s that?” Will said, peering over Lucas’ shoulder and pointing to a file folder on the monitor.

“It’s named ‘Project Resurrection’,” Lucas said, tapping the screen and pressing a few keys, then shook his head again. “Can’t get in, it’s beyond encrypted.”

“Well, *that’s* concerning.”

“A little,” Will agreed. “Is that it?”

“That’s certainly it for you,” said a voice behind them.

Mike and Lucas spun around and drew their blasters as the hiss of Will’s lightsabers echoed around the chamber. Facing them was a middle-aged man in an Imperial uniform, calmly holding out a blaster pistol Will didn’t recognise.

“Lower your weapons,” the officer said coldly, and Will heard him take the blaster’s safety off.

“Easy,” Will said slowly. He didn’t want to have to kill him, but neither was he going to die, or let Mike and Lucas die, for that matter. “We outmatch you in numbers and power, you don’t want to do this.”

“On the contrary,” the officer replied in a satisfied voice, “this means promotion.”

“Tell us about the planet,” Will said quickly, with a wave of his hand, before the others could interject.

The officer’s eyes seemed to drift out of focus for a moment, but then he quickly shook his head and furrowed his eyebrows. “I said, drop your weapons.”

“Holy shit,” muttered Mike. “Since when does that not work?”

“Clearly this one’s cleverer than he looks. Tell us about the planet,” Will repeated firmly.

Once again, the officer seemed to lose his train of thought for a moment, then spoke into a wrist-comm. “I need backup in – ” His sentence cut off sharply as he appeared to choke on the words.

“*Garbled transmission,*” said a voice through the wrist-comm. “*Repeat.*”

“I need backup in the – ” Once again, the sentence halted before the officer could report a location. Silence fell for a moment, then the officer gasped for air.

“Will,” Mike said through gritted teeth.

“What?” he hissed back. “Do you want him to just tell them where we are?”

“Could just do this,” Lucas piped up, and fired a bolt from his blaster perfectly into the control unit of the officer’s communicator. The officer fired a returning shot, which bounced easily off Lucas’ armour and ricocheted into the ceiling. “See? No problem.”

“Now,” Will said, extending one lightsaber towards the officer and offering him a cold smile, “tell us about the planet, or we *will* kill you.”

“Why would I give up the information that’s keeping me alive?” he shot back.

“Because these do more than kill,” Will said immediately, still smiling.

“You’re bluffing.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Will hurled one lightsaber; the officer suppressed a gasp of pure agony as it bored through his hand, pinning it to the wall. “You reckon?”

“They’re... they’re calling the project... Starkiller,” the officer gasped, “but the planet’s called Ilum – ”

“Wait,” Mike said slowly, recognising the name.

“What does this so-called First Order want with Ilum?” Will demanded, crossing the room and holding his second blade to the officer’s neck.

“The... the crystals? I don’t know,” the officer said through gritted teeth, sweat beading at his temples.

“The Empire stripped it of crystals,” Mike said. “Years ago, El told me.”

“I swear to you I don’t know,” the officer shouted, as a blast door slid

open at the other end of the room.

“Hands up,” said a female voice, with the familiar stifled quality of being muffled by a helmet.

“For pity’s *sake!*” Will snapped, summoning his first lightsaber back to his hand and making two clean strokes in the officer’s torso.

He whirled around in frustration, ignoring Mike’s alarmed expression, and took in the company of stormtroopers. Leading them was some kind of assault trooper with a black stripe running down the left side of her helmet and armour, wielding a long electrostaff, already glowing with violet light.

“You really thought we wouldn’t set up security cameras in a room with this kind of information?” she sneered.

Mike snorted. “Then your response time is awful – we’ve been here nearly half an hour.”

“Besides, it’s not like there was much useful information,” Lucas added.

“It really doesn’t matter either way,” she said, twirling the staff in her hand. “You’ll never get to tell it to anyone anyway. Hold your fire,” she added to the troopers behind her. “I’ll deal with them myself.”

She moved slowly around the console, reminding Will strongly of a wolf he’d once seen hunting scuzz. To Will’s relief, Mike backed away, and Chester scurried behind him, but Lucas produced a long knife from somewhere and thrust it out, aiming for the gap between the base of her helmet and her chest-plate. The assault trooper blocked the strike with one hand, forcing his arm upwards and jabbed the electrostaff into his unprotected armpit.

Lucas was blasted off his feet by the strength of the current, and as he scrambled to his feet again, he seized his helmet and donned it, only just managing to hold out his forearms to block her incoming blow. Sparks flew from the nearly-impenetrable beskar, and he jumped into the air, planting a solid kick to her abdomen with both feet,

supported by a brief ignition of his jetpack. She stumbled backwards, clearly thrown by this unorthodox move, giving Lucas the opportunity to shoot his whipcord towards the electrostaff. As intended, it wrapped itself neatly around the staff, but this time, she was too quick, and she twisted the staff sharply in her hands, yanking on the cord and pulling him off-balance. She jammed the end of the staff into his jetpack and pushed down hard; the voltage overwhelmed its electronics, and it short-circuited, shooting a few sparks from the thrusters as it faltered. She seized his helmet by its rangefinder and pulled it off, smacked him around the head with it and kicked him to the ground.

“Bastard,” Lucas spluttered in shocked outrage. As his final resort, he lifted a hand and activated his flamethrower, but equally, she raised her fist and activated a coolant gun, perfectly counteracting the spitting flames.

“You think we weren’t trained to deal with Mandalorians?” the assault trooper said smugly. “Or Jedi, for that matter,” she added, her tone becoming savage as she turned towards Will.

Will, however, simply smiled. “Then today isn’t your lucky day.”

She laughed in his face. “And why is that?”

“Because,” he said casually, “I’m not a Jedi.” He thrust out a hand, knocking her backwards with a Force push she couldn’t have blocked if she’d tried. He activated his lightsabers as she picked herself up, and with a twitch of one hand, he tore the console from the floor, sending it towards the platoon at speed. They fell as one with a shout, largely unhurt, but trapped beneath the weight of the console.

“Impressive,” she spat, twisting the electrostaff in her hands. Will watched with mild surprise as it split into two electrobatons, and the air shimmered as she spun them around each other. “Just in case you thought having two weapons gave you an advantage.”

“Alright, challenge accepted,” Will said with a shrug, sheathing his second saber. “I’ll fight with one.”

“Idiot,” she said with a derisive laugh. “I’ll kill you, you know.”

“We’ll see.”

He gripped the lightsaber hilt with two hands without a hint of apprehension. After all, Mike had enough of that for the two of them; Will could sense his dread through the Force, but he tried to block it out. El’s teachings were still useful, occasionally; that said, he wasn’t opposed to some mild cheating these days.

With this in mind, as she made the first move, he reached through the Force and fired one of the stormtroopers’ blasters in a random direction, distracting her long enough to sidestep her electrobaton and strike the back of her helmet with the pommel of his lightsaber hilt.

“That’s probably a mild concussion,” he said conversationally as she recovered and went for a second blow, which he dodged. “You might want to get that looked at.”

The assault trooper bore down on him again, but her crossed electrobatons were blocked by the pure-white beam of energy pouring forth from the hilt in his hand. Sparks singed his tunic and melted score-holes in the durasteel wall to his right, and it was at this point that he decided to change tack: making her angry was going to ruin his clothes if he wasn’t careful.

Will slid his blade out from under the batons and simply parried her blows for a while, giving ground, before countering with a flurry of strikes she had to work hard to block. He sliced a chunk out of her shoulder-guard to frighten her, but nothing more. The time wasn’t right.

In retaliation, she issued a sharp kick to the groin, eliciting a cry of real pain, and this time, his defensive stance was genuine, focusing on not taking any more hits as he relinquished his discomfort to the Force. It was at this point that Will decided he’d had enough of this fight, and it looked as though the other troopers were nearly free of their makeshift restraint, so time was short. He positioned his blocks carefully, sensing her attack patterns, waiting for her to once again strike with both electrobatons simultaneously. It was only a matter of time.

Sure enough, less than a minute later, she raised them both above her head and brought them down heavily on his horizontal blade. The three weapons locked together, and Will reached for his belt as the indigo and white light forged flames in the pupils of his eyes.

“The thing about not being a Jedi,” he said, his voice barely audible over the hum of their weapons, “is that you don’t have to fight fair.” Through the cacophony of sound, the room was filled with the hiss of another lightsaber being activated, and the assault trooper’s eyes widened in shock under her helmet as the plasma blade seared through her torso, burning the life from her body. Her weapons dropped to the floor with a series of clatters, and Will stepped back as she slumped backwards against the wall, lifeless.

With the most prevalent threat dispatched, Mike and Lucas opened fire on the stormtroopers in the doorway, and Will plunged his lightsaber into the door’s control panel, sealing them off from any potential reinforcements.

“We need to leave,” Mike said, as Chester let out a low warble to indicate his agreement.

Will nodded and waved a hand, reaching into the Force to open the door they’d entered through, then beckoned them out into the corridor. Almost immediately, a lone stormtrooper rounded the corner, and Lucas fired a blaster bolt neatly into the trooper’s head. The sound of the shot reverberated around the corridor, and with a twist of Will’s hand, Lucas’ blaster slid from his grip.

“Will you keep it down?” Will hissed. “We’re trying to lay low!”

“But they already know we’re here,” Lucas pointed out.

“Yes, but they don’t know *where* we are,” Will said, switching Lucas’ blaster to stun mode and passing it back to him. “I’d like to keep it that way, at least until we get back to the hangar. Come on.”

Mike and Lucas dutifully followed him through the seemingly endless labyrinth of aurodium walls, trusting – and desperately hoping – that

he knew where he was going. Once again he found Will's ability to seemingly vanish from sight thoroughly unsettling, and thanked whatever gods there were that he was on their side, and not the Empire's – or rather, the First Order's, as he would have to start saying.

This thought triggered a disturbing idea which he had not considered before – what if Will had never left the Imperial Academy, and had discovered his powers whilst in the service of the Empire? Would they have killed him? Or worse – made him an Inquisitor? His mind flashed, inevitably, to the horrific memory of Will fighting El in the Massassi temple on Yavin IV. Sometimes, in his worst dreams, Mike could still see the fury in his eyes, seemingly burning crimson by the light of the blade in his hands.

Thankfully, this string of deeply unpleasant memories was cut short as Will reappeared in their field of vision, holding out a hand for them to stop.

“What's going on?”

“Hangar's right on the other side of this door,” he whispered, “but since they don't know where we went, they've doubled down on security in the hangars, to make sure we can't get away.”

“So we should have made ourselves heard after all,” Lucas said drily.

Will ignored him. “It's not going to be easy,” he said, his eyes finding Mike's. “I'll protect you as much as I can. Aim for the nearest transport that will carry seven.” He paused, and gripped his lightsaber hilts tightly. “You ready?”

“No,” Mike said bluntly, eliciting a low chuckle from under Lucas' helmet.

“That's the spirit.”

With a grim nod, Will held up a hand towards the blast doors and closed his eyes. Through the Force, he was reaching into its circuitry, hoping to trip the right combination of wires that would nudge the door open. However, when that didn't work, he decided to opt for a

simpler approach. He clenched his cybernetic hand into a fist; the groan from the door and Mike's soft gasp from behind him informed him that this plan was working.

He willed the Force to overcome him, synergising his body and the door, until with an immense metallic creak, the doors folded inwards towards them, creating a narrow opening. Sparks flew from the overexerted control panel on the wall, and Will allowed himself only a moment to register Mike's look of astonishment before slipping through the gap and igniting his lightsabers.

Lucas followed suit, bemoaning the loss of his jetpack's functionality, and then Mike made a dash for it, crouching behind Lucas, who was remarkably better-defended than him, even grounded. He fired round after round at the few troopers who skirted around Will and Lucas to attack them from behind.

He only checked a couple of times, but Will and Lucas seemed to be wreaking absolute havoc: as well as blocking with his lightsabers, Will was, as it turned out, using the Force to redirect the stormtroopers' shots in such a way that they were effectively shooting at each other. Lucas, meanwhile, had snagged an overhead fuel line with his whipcord and broken it, before torching the soaked hangar deck with a brief blast of his flamethrower, creating a wall of fire powerful enough to melt the nearest stormtroopers' plastoid armour.

He couldn't see the flames, but he could feel the heat on the back of his head and neck. It was entirely distracting, and the number of stormtroopers approaching from behind was increasing: clearly the word had travelled about which hangar they were tearing apart.

"Will," he began, but whatever he had been about to say, Will never heard it. A stormtrooper fired a couple of bolts towards the group, where one struck Mike in his left shoulder, and the other in his knee on the same side. He gasped in agony, inaudible over the din, but Will sensed it immediately, whirled around and launched one lightsaber towards Mike's assailant, promptly running the trooper through. Mike listed to one side, and Lucas hastily caught him, retiring one of his blaster pistols to support Mike with his other hand.

"We're almost there!" Will said furiously, reaching out a hand and

pulling a struggling stormtrooper onto the end of his blade, before hurling the corpse to knock another to the ground.

Helpfully, Chester had scurried through the battlefront ahead of them, and was already hacking into the shuttle's control's to lower its ramp. As Lucas hauled Mike up into the hold, Will slammed a hand to the ground, sending out a shock wave through the Force strong enough to crack the shining metal floor. The approaching troopers were thrown off their feet, and as they recovered, Will seized his opportunity to join the others inside the shuttle. Mike was still sitting in the hold, taking shelter behind some crates, and Chester was scanning his injuries.

"Get us out of here!" Will yelled in the general direction of the cockpit, then added, after a moment's thought, "and I need to borrow your rocket launcher!"

With Lucas' weapon acquired, Will climbed to the hatch on the shuttle roof and poked his head and shoulders out, hooking one foot around the ladder for balance. This manoeuvre would require precision. He dodged one stray blaster bolt, before firing one of Lucas' strongest missiles into the control panel for the hangar's ray shields. The hangar shook with the force of the explosion, and a few seconds later, the outer shield blinked out of existence, exposing the entire hangar to the cold void of space. Immediately, troopers and ships were launched into motion, sucked out of the hangar with every molecule of air. Thankfully, Lucas chose this moment to fire up the thrusters, stabilising their freefall into space, and he deftly steered them clear of the pieces of debris and broken ships.

Only now confident that it was safe, Will returned to the hold, lifting Mike into his arms and carrying him to the scant medical bay in the belly of the shuttle.

"Thanks," Mike murmured, barely conscious for shock and loss of blood.

Will wasn't sure how to reply, but he found himself affectionately brushing Mike's hair clear of his eyes as he laid him down on the

recuperation bunk and busied himself finding bacta patches and bandages. Splitting up had been too great a risk, as Mike had said it would be, and now it was Mike who was paying the price for their rash decision-making. He could only hope that things were going better down on the planet's surface below.

Djenna flailed wildly as she fell, searching for a handhold to halt her descent. She heard El shout her name from above, and suddenly her hands felt ice, and she closed her fingers. She jolted to a stop, and with a sinking heart, heard a *click* as the clip loosely attaching her lightsaber to her belt gave way. She *knew* she should have mended it. The chromium hilt met the ice walls with a series of clatters as it bounced down the shaft and disappeared forever into the abyss.

“Master!”

Djenna's voice echoed around the curved wall of the chasm, her fingers clutching desperately at the icy outcrop protruding from the rock. She made to reposition her hands to improve her grip, but the movement shook a few small chunks of ice loose, and the outcrop shifted marginally.

“Stay still!” El ordered, and Djenna froze, not least because she couldn't remember ever hearing El sound so concerned. “Can you jump up?”

“No,” Djenna replied, unable to suppress the tremor in her voice. “We haven't covered that yet.”

“Then I'll lift you,” El said, a firm determination entering her tone. “Djenna,” she said, more gently, “you're going to have to let go.”

“What?” Djenna demanded, certain she must have misheard.

“Let go,” El repeated, kneeling down and closing her eyes. “I'll catch you, trust me.”

Djenna hesitated. It wasn't that she *didn't* trust El. It was just that she'd never had to before, and that she never really felt that El trusted *her*. She had often come across as a little overbearing in their

training sessions since taking Djenna on as an apprentice, having been fairly distant with all the students during their early years of teaching, as a result of travelling the galaxy to find recruits. Now, for the first time, it was just the two of them. And Djenna's life was in El's hands.

"Trust me," El repeated gently, and Djenna swallowed hard, remembering an early teaching. *All this, as the Force wills it.* She closed her eyes, and let go. She began to fall, and with surprising calmness, embraced the end.

A jolt forced her eyes open, and Djenna realised with astonishment that the chasm walls were moving *down*, not up. As she rose, she dared not move for fear of breaking El's connection, but presently her eyes were level with her master's; as El set her down on solid ground, she offered Djenna one of her rare smiles, her dark eyes gentler than they often seemed. Djenna found herself, inexplicably, lost for words.

"Thanks," she said, her voice shaking like a wroshyr leaf. "You... I..."

"Don't mention it," El said, standing up and helping Djenna to her feet. "And don't worry about your lightsaber. As it happens, you lost it in one of the most convenient places in the galaxy."

"What do you mean?"

"I told you – this planet once served as one of the largest sources of kyber crystals in the galaxy."

"But I thought the Empire's been mining them?"

"They have," El said with a shrug, "but it's no coincidence that we find ourselves here. Perhaps this is why." It occurred to Djenna that if they hadn't come, she wouldn't have lost her lightsaber, but decided not to mention this. "Besides, I'm pretty sure it would take longer than twenty-five years to harvest every crystal on the planet."

Djenna stopped in her tracks. "They've been here for *twenty-five years*?"

"Oh, at least," El said gloomily. "They've probably been here since the Old Republic fell, since the Emperor knew about Ilum. And they

were certainly here within five years – I had a correspondent during the Rebellion who came here around then, and they'd already established an operation."

"That's interesting and all," Djenna said, trying to remain patient, "but how do I find a new crystal? You said yourself that we don't have long here."

"Well, it's something you have to do by yourself," El said, as they reached a fork in the path. She pointed to the right-hand tunnel. "I'm going this way to find Max and Dustin. Wait here a while and meditate. Go where the Force leads you."

"Alright," Djenna said, not entirely convinced. She watched El disappear into the tunnel, then exhaled deeply, knelt to the ground in a patch of sunlight beaming through a small hole in the ice, and let the Force take her.

When she opened her eyes again, it was dark. Or rather, it was night, but the bustling cityscape left her standing in a brightly-lit alleyway somewhere in the undercity. Of the hundreds of people pushing through the crowded street, not one seemed to be paying her any attention. In fact, Djenna wondered if they could even see her, or if she was really there at all. She suspected not: although she had heard stories of people using the Force to teleport, she had never witnessed it.

As she gazed around, taking in her apparent surroundings, something seemed a little... off. She recognised these streets, and the architectural style, but it felt as though someone had painted an image she'd described, and hadn't quite got it right.

As she pondered this, she became increasingly aware that despite her certainty that this was a vision, someone was watching her. She spun around, reaching for her lightsaber, but found, of course, that it was not at her belt. The figure in front of her, tiny, venerable, vaguely transparent and glowing with a pale blue light, seemed amused by the sight of her hands closing on nothingness.

"Lost your weapon, you have, hm?" he said, his ancient eyes twinkling.

"Yes, master," she said in awe. She knew who he was, of course – everyone at the Academy did. Their instructors made sure of it. "I need a new one."

He tilted his head slightly to one side. "Make you a Jedi, a lightsaber does not." Djenna found that she wasn't really sure how to reply to this, so she said nothing. Her companion took a few small steps forward, and she sensed she was supposed to walk alongside him. She immediately caught up with him, and the crowds parted as they approached. "Know where you are, do you?"

"Yes," she said, looking up at the lanterns strung between the buildings at random angles and intervals. "I think this is the undercity of Hosnian Prime. I grew up here."

"Indeed. Brought from Tholoth, you were not."

"My parents were refugees. Street traders," Djenna supplied. She suspected that he already knew this, but she felt inclined to tell him all the same. At any rate, he didn't interrupt her. "They were robbed one night and killed, but the robbers didn't think to look for me. Master El found me the next day."

"And to the Temple, took you," he finished, nodding sagely. "Unfortunate, these circumstances were."

"But if they hadn't happened," she reasoned, "Master El might not have found me. She was investigating a string of such incidents."

He inclined his head again. "Thinking now like a Jedi, you are."

"This place," she said, voicing her misgivings for the first time, "it doesn't quite... look right."

"Correct, you are," he said, turning at the end of the street. On the horizon, the Senate building loomed. In the daytime, it would have cast a shadow over the streets adjacent to it. now, though, its lights flickered like stars against the city backdrop. "Your past, this is not, but the future. After twenty more years, advanced, the New Republic

has, and these streets with it.”

“This is twenty years in the future?” she repeated in wonder.

“Always in motion is the future,” he corrected. “What *could* be, this is. Maybe not what *will* be.”

“Could be if... what?”

A throaty chuckle escaped his throat. “If see that, Jedi could, every problem in an instant, we could solve.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Good!” he said triumphantly. “Good! The first step towards understanding, admitting ignorance is.”

Djenna bit her lip. He was being infuriating. “Why am I here?”

“Here, you are not.”

She resisted the urge to kick him and tried again. “Why am I *seeing this*, then?”

“A choice, you have, young one,” he replied, more gently. “The same choice all Jedi face – yourself, or the Force. From the Jedi, step away you can, or persist along this path.”

“Why would I step away?” Djenna asked, stunned. “Without the Jedi, I’m an orphan, lost in the galaxy. This is all I have.”

As though travelling in a dream, they were no longer in the city centre; instead, they were ascending to the crest of a hill in the industrial sector. When they reached its peak, he perched himself on a low, flat rock, and she sat down on the ground next to him. She glanced up at the sky, blinking in surprise at a new star which had appeared in the sky – tiny and bright, but blood-red.

“Master, why am I really here?” she asked, more calmly, but distracted by the star. “What advantage is there to knowing one potential future, if I don’t know the events that led to it?”

“Advantage?” he repeated, as though the question surprised him. “None whatsoever. Misleading, premonitions can be – but important nonetheless. Young one,” he went on, changing his tack completely, “why are you a Jedi?”

“I told you,” she said, “Master El found me, and I have no one else.”

“Believe in destiny, do you?”

The question took Djenna by surprise. “I... suppose so. We were always taught that everything that happens is because of the will of the Force.”

Her companion hummed in acknowledgement. The fall of the Jedi, and the rise of the Empire – the will of the Force, was this?”

She considered this. “Perhaps it was... a means to an end? A necessary trial, to rid the galaxy of the Sith for good?” She had planned to go on, but the new star in the sky was making her uneasy, as it seemed to be getting bigger.

“One explanation, this is. Is there another?”

Her gaze was transfixed on the expanding star, but she found she already had an answer. “That the will of the Force is determined by those who sense it,” she said, taken aback by the certainty of her words, and their sincerity. “To say that the will of the Force is absolute, discredits our ability to make a difference.”

“Wise, you are becoming, little one,” he said, and the praise warmed her hearts. “Wisdom, you have, that I ignored for centuries. And so?”

“And so,” she replied, as the light grew to the size of a nearby moon, lighting up the gathering clouds and bathing the landscape in crimson light, “I’m not just a Jedi because El found me, or because I don’t have anywhere else to go – but because I choose to be, and it’s right.”

“And what makes you a Jedi,” he said approvingly, “*that* is.”

“Master,” she said, squinting as the light became too bright to bear, “what *is* that?”

“The consequence,” he said, sounding melancholic for the first time, “of a thousand wrong decisions, this is. The suffering of billions, aided by the wilful ignorance of hundreds. ”

“Can it be stopped?”

“Little time, there is.” It did not escape Djenna’s notice that he hadn’t answered her question. “Only until the light reaches us, can we commune. Earned this, I think you have.” He opened a hand, and hovering in the space above it, appeared a small, clear, crystal. She looked down at him for reassurance, and he inclined his head. She closed her fingers around it and smiled; it felt warm and comfortable in her hand, as though it had been made just for her. “Remember the details of this encounter, you will not. Too much power you would possess, and dangerous this would be.”

“I understand.”

“Forget not, though, what you have learned,” he urged her. The entire skyline burned scarlet, and forks of vermillion lightning flashed across the sky. “Trust in the Force, you must.” His image faded, and Djenna was left alone to shield her eyes from the excruciatingly bright light as it drew closer, clutching the crystal tightly in her fist. The ground shook violently beneath her feet, and for a brief, agonising moment, it seemed that someone had pushed her into a furnace, blinding her, stifling her breaths and scalding her skin.

As quickly as it happened, the pain passed, and Djenna drew a gasp as her eyes flew open, her hands bitten with cold from the ice floor she’d been lying on. She clenched her fists to re-engage her circulation, and gasped as something sharp bit into her skin. She opened a trembling hand, and there, lying in her palm, was the crystal she’d received in her vision.

The vision. The end. Hosnian Prime – she had to tell El what she’d witnessed. She broke into a run down the tunnel El had entered; Djenna had no idea how long she’d been there, but she might catch El if she hurried. As she ran, though, she found that she was

struggling to recall details of the encounter. She slowed down, trying to think – Hosnian Prime was destroyed, certainly... but she couldn't remember exactly how it happened. Or even, come to think of it, as she slowed to a walk, *what* had happened. She'd seen the future, she was sure, but... whose future? And when?

Remember the details of this encounter, you will not. There was that voice, the voice of the Jedi she'd met... if only she could remember his name.

Forget not, though, what you have learned...

"I am a Jedi," she breathed, starting to jog again. "Not because I have to be – but because it's the right thing to do." Despite herself, a smile broke out across her face at these words, and her jog turned into a momentary skip, enjoying a newfound sense of freedom – one she'd never felt before.

6. XVIII

Summary for the Chapter:

The crew make a desperate escape from Ilum, determined to make it back to the New Republic with the information they've gathered.

"So," Dustin said, finishing his pacing and slumping down on the icy floor next to Max. "How long do you reckon they're going to make us wait up here?"

"They'll get here," she replied. "Eventually."

"I thought coming down onto the planet would be more exciting," he grumbled, and she cracked a smile.

"You thought infiltrating a remote corner of a *planet* would be more interesting than breaking into a single star destroyer?" He shrugged, and Max chuckled. "If you can't figure out why that's dumb, I don't know what to tell you."

"Still, it's nice to be back in the field," Dustin said, polishing a blemish on the barrel of his blaster. "Don't get much of a chance to these days, with the New Republic."

Max snorted. "I thought they'd have you out there all the time – cleaning up their messes."

"Messes?" he asked, giving her a funny look.

"Don't tell me you haven't noticed," she replied in disbelief. "The New Republic's in shambles," she said, more gently when she realised he genuinely had no idea what she was talking about. "Nearly eight years since Endor, and they've done nothing about all *this*." She gestured out at the view from their vantage point, and they sat in silence for a few moments, taking in the plethora of star destroyers looming ominously in the upper atmosphere, and the distant sound of drilling.

"They had other priorities," Dustin said firmly. "Have you ever tried

reconstructing democracy before? For five years, there *was* no government, there was just the Emperor. Without him, there was nothing left.”

Max snorted. “Try nearly thirty years. The Senate was just a... formality, even as late as the clone wars.”

“Exactly my point. They had to build literally from the ground up.”

“Okay, that’s fair,” Max replied, “but what exactly did they build?”

“A New Republic. The clue’s in the name.”

“But that’s the thing – they *didn’t* build a New Republic, they rebuilt the old one, without acknowledging what went wrong last time, and the issues which caused it to collapse in the first place.”

“But – ”

“Failing to resolve interplanetary conflicts; assigning too much power to the people at the top; turning a blind eye to the rampant slavery and organised crime in the Outer Rim.” She shuddered. “Mike and I have *seen* what life’s like out there. A lot of people feel like they were better off under the Empire, and the New Republic hasn’t done much to convince them otherwise.”

“But using the amount of force needed to overcome these kinds of issues would have turned us into a new Empire!” Dustin protested.

“Not if the New Republic had actually prioritised its systems in the Mid and Outer Rims, instead of just building up the Core Worlds, which were already stable – both socially and economically. Tell me – which planets have seen a significant increase in funding in the last seven years? Hosnian Prime? Hevurion? Coruscant?” Dustin chewed his lip, and Max sighed in frustration. “I know it’s hard to accept when you haven’t seen it for yourself but... the New Republic isn’t working, Dustin. Nothing is.”

Dustin mulled on this, considering Max’s words. She wasn’t wrong, he *hadn’t* seen what life was like for ordinary people. He spent most of his time either flitting between New Republic flagships, or on Hosnian Prime on leave. Were things really as bad as she said? And if

so, could he, in good conscience, continue to live and work as though they were not?

He didn't reach an answer to his questions before he heard footsteps down the cliff passage, and both he and Max reached for their blasters, but it was El, looking a little worse for wear but quite calm.

"You took your time," he said, more bluntly than he intended.

"Ran into some issues," she replied. "Including the local wildlife."

"There's life on this rock?" Max said in disbelief. "Thought it would be barren."

El hummed and sat down beside them. "I think there's life everywhere, if you think to look."

Max and Dustin exchanged a glance; she was being philosophical again. "Where's Djenna?" Max asked.

"She'll be here shortly – she's finding a new lightsaber crystal."

"As you do," Max said casually, and Dustin snickered.

"What were you talking about?" El asked, and he pointedly didn't answer.

"The many accidental failings of the New Republic," Max said after a moment.

El nodded. "I won't offer an opinion. Jedi aren't supposed to get involved with politics."

"Another example of history repeating itself." An uncomfortable silence succeeded this statement as Max realised the implications of her words. "Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean –"

"No, you might have a point," El said with a sigh. "Perhaps we do have too much of a tendency to get stuck in old ways."

Before they could debate this any further, though, they heard more footsteps, and Djenna rounded the corner, looking practically radiant as she ran up the passage towards them and out of the tunnel.

"I found it," she said excitedly, holding it out to show El.

"Well done," El said with an encouraging smile. "We should get moving. I received a radio call from Lucas on my way back, so they won't be far away."

"You didn't mention that!" Dustin spluttered.

"It wasn't relevant yet," El said simply. "Were we supposed to leave without Djenna?" Without waiting for a reply, she led them away along the cliffside. "Once they're here we won't have long," she called back. "Even if they've got away from the destroyer unnoticed, they'll trigger every alarm in the system when they try and come down here for us."

"Where exactly are we going?" Max asked after they'd walked a little further.

"Not sure," El said, "but this feels right."

"*Ground team, do you copy?*" Dustin's heart soared at the sound of Lucas' voice.

"Air team, we copy," El said immediately into her wrist-comm. "What's your status?"

"On our way down with several squads of starfighters on our tail, so landing might be a little bumpy. Mike got hurt pretty bad up there, and Will's treating him, so I'm flying this piece of junk by myself."

Max and Dustin exchanged alarmed looks, but El pressed on. "I've just activated our homing beacon. We've found some ice flats sturdy enough for you to land on. See you in a minute."

They squinted up into the bright blue sky, looking for any sign of an incoming ship. Finally, Djenna shouted, "There!" A dark grey dot was

streaking wildly through the sky like a moxfly around bantha dung; Lucas was apparently pulling off some difficult stunts in a desperate attempt to lose the TIEs that were also coming into view.

“Come on, come on,” Dustin murmured through gritted teeth; suddenly, the shuttle’s engines cut, and it dropped like a stone, and the fighters had to accelerate hard to keep up with it.

“Shit, they’ve lost power,” Max gasped, but Djenna squinted up at it.

“I don’t think so.”

Max averted her eyes, unwilling to watch the crash, but at the last possible second, the reverse thrusters roared into life and Lucas pulled up, deftly dodging the torrent of green plasma the TIE-fighters were throwing at them and landing with only a slight bump on the precipice next to them. The majority of the TIEs, commanded by much less able pilots, failed to make the turn in time, and all, bar one, simply smashed into the ground in their attempts to level out their craft.

“Quick,” El said urgently. “That thing will have us back in its sights in seconds.” Sure enough, the final fighter was accelerating away impossibly fast, completing a long loop – to maximise the line-up time, Max supposed.

They started boarding before the ramp had even touched down, and Dustin yelled, “Go!” up to the cockpit the second they were all onboard.

Lucas didn’t need to be told twice, but called back, “Get to the guns!” Without a word, El, Max and Djenna each took control of one gun system, and Dustin joined Lucas in the cockpit.

“Nice job with the landing,” he said, and Lucas grimaced.

“Nearly ended very badly. Wing took a hit as I cut the engines and I almost lost control. Don’t know if you noticed.”

“Want me to look at it?”

“Not until we’ve made lightspeed, it’ll be fine until then.”

“Plotting a course to Hosnian Prime. Hyperspace lane is fifteen degrees right and sixty degrees down.”

The sudden activation of the shuttle’s mounted cannons took them both by surprise, and Lucas lurched to avoid a starfighter spiralling towards them. “That was *too* close.”

Down in the shuttle’s medical bay, Will was inclined to agree, and Mike moaned with pain as the ship rocked.

“What was that?” he murmured, and Will shook his head.

“I’ve no idea, but I need you to roll onto your side.” He had sustained two nasty injuries; his knee needed attention, but it was less pressing than his shoulder. “Go on, I’ll hold you steady.”

Mike obligingly turned over with a whimper as the ship half-rolled, and as he tightened his grip on Mike’s arm to hold him still, Will winced at the sight of his blood-soaked shirt sticking to his back. He reached into his belt for a knife and made a swift cut down the centre of the thin material, peeling it off him with a sickening noise. Holding the fabric back with one hand, he summoned a bacta spray from one of the supply crates, willing it to his hand and shaking it in preparation.

“Mike, I’m so sorry, but this is going to hurt.”

“Do it,” he gasped, and Will released a spray of liquid onto the wound. Mike buried his face into the thin pillow and screamed in agony, as Will held a patch over the gash with a shaking hand.

When all was said and done, Will thought, bacta was a wonderful substance; it could heal virtually all flesh wounds, and some deeper injuries. It had, however, two main drawbacks: the first was that it couldn’t in any way prevent wounds from scarring. The second, more pressing, issue was that it worked most powerfully when highly concentrated, but in this form, had a similar sensation to pouring undiluted acid directly onto one’s nerve-endings.

It was therefore not surprising that Mike was now taking deep,

shuddering breaths between sobs of torment; it reassured Will, though, that when he lifted the patch he could already see the tissue fibres starting to meld back together. He held one hand over the patch and closed his eyes, sensing the extent of the damage through the Force, and breathed a sigh of relief. The plasma bolt, long since atomised, had not perforated his lung, which had been Will's primary concern, and would have been a much more severe problem.

Now, he thought briskly, *for the leg*. A leg injury was less life-threatening, and upon first examination, also seemed less severe, which was all for the better. Will knew, however, that a slip-up could cost Mike his mobility.

Retrieving his knife, he cut at the material around Mike's knee with intricate precision, sliding it off over his foot. He would have to use the bacta spray again and bandage it tightly, he thought desolately, and told Mike as such, who gritted his teeth and nodded. With his lips clamped together, his cry was much more muffled, but just as agonised, and Will blinked away the moisture blurring his vision.

It was at this moment that he realised he didn't have a bandage, and quickly weighed up his options, before slicing off a length of his own sleeve and winding it tightly around the bacta patch. It wasn't sterile, but the patch was, and would protect the wound long enough to get him to proper medical attention.

Only then did Will realise that the ship's tossing and turning had stopped, and they were now travelling smoothly forward. He collapsed back into the nearest chair with relief – this meant they'd achieved lightspeed. They'd made it. He slipped Mike a mild sedative to settle his breathing and bring his body out of shock, then closed his eyes, feeling physically and emotionally exhausted.

He was just about drifting off to sleep when he sensed a nearby presence in the Force – known to him, yet unfamiliar. Will opened his eyes again, and wasn't surprised to see Djenna standing at the foot of the ladder to the hold, clutching a familiar tin box in one hand, and something small concealed in the other.

"Hello," Will said doubtfully, unsure how he was supposed to talk to a young Jedi, having never met one before.

"I need your help," Djenna said by way of greeting, and Will's eyes flickered in surprise.

"Are you sure?"

"I need to build a lightsaber."

"I thought you had one."

"I did," she said sheepishly. "I lost it on Ilum, but found a new crystal."

The ghost of a smile formed on his face. "How very fortunate."

"El says there's no such thing as luck."

He hummed an acknowledgement of this, unsure whether or not he agreed. "You've not built a lightsaber before?"

"I've never even had my own crystal. We were given our first ones at the Academy, with synthetic crystals, because real crystals are so hard to find."

"I see," he said, considering his options. On the one hand, he had little desire to assist in the training of a Jedi; on the other, possession of a lightsaber was not exclusive to the Jedi (he was living proof of this), so maybe he could justify it. "Alright," he said, and patted a nearby table. She placed the tin and her crystal on it.

"It doesn't have a colour," she said, examining it. "Does that mean it'll be white, like yours?"

"No," he said. "Natural crystals have no colour until they come into your possession. It is, effectively, the wielder who gives them colour."

"So I can choose?" she asked, perking up.

Will chuckled. "No, not exactly. The colour of your blade is a reflection of who you are: your personality, your skills, your focus."

He ignited one of his own to demonstrate, turning it marginally in the air, listening to it hum, his face illuminated by its pure-white light. "My blades are white partly because of the way the crystals were formed, but also because I am not a Jedi. Neither am I Sith; neither fallen, nor redeemed. I am simply... here. I am, if you will, a representation of the balance between the Light and the Dark, and my blades' neutral colour reflects this." He pressed the switch again to deactivate it, and indicated to the box. "Open it."

She obeyed, and found many pieces of metal and different lightsaber parts, as Will had when he'd built his first lightsaber on Yavin IV. "What do I do?"

"Reach into the Force, and ask to see which pieces belong to you." She closed her eyes, and Will waited, until after a few moments, several different components and scraps of metal lifted out of the tin box and into the air. "Well done. That's the easy bit."

"That was the *easy* bit?" she echoed, and he chuckled.

"Actually, for a technician such as yourself, perhaps not."

"So what now?"

"Construct it," he said simply. "Let the Force guide your hand. If you've done it right, you should have little need for tools, although you can use them once it's assembled."

Djenna closed her eyes once more, and the pieces lifted into the air, turning carefully around each other and slotting neatly together. A couple of sets of wires lifted out of the tin, too, and a couple of sparks blinked as they welded themselves to the other components. Will watched with interest as the emitter *clicked* into place, holding the rest of the hilt together, and Djenna caught it as it fell, weighing it in her hand.

"How does it feel?" he asked tentatively, and she smiled broadly.

"Mine," was her simple reply, and her thumb hesitated on the switch.

"Moment of truth," he said light-heartedly, and she pushed it upwards, illuminating the dimly-lit room with a soft yellow glow.

“Well, I never,” he mused, chuckling at her astonished expression.

“I thought... it would be blue or green,” she said in wonder, twirling it in her hand.

“According to the old Jedi writings, it is a sentinel’s weapon,” Will said, some forgotten teachings returning to him in a moment of inspiration. “One used by a Jedi who holds other skills in high esteem, other than the Force and lightsaber combat. It’s possible your technical skills will come in more useful than you realise.”

“How?” she asked, still gazing into its warm light.

“I’ve no idea,” he replied. “But I daresay your path will reveal itself in due course. Why don’t you go and show El? I’m sure she’ll be impressed.”

The blade shrank away and Djenna bounded off, but paused at the ladder. “Thank you,” she said genuinely, and vanished through the hatch.

Will watched her go, then turned back to the bed, to see that Mike had rolled over and was watching intently, with a distinctly fond expression.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he murmured. “I just think you’d be a good teacher.”

“Sure, if any of them decide the Academy isn’t for them.”

Mike chuckled, and Will noticed his eyes drift to where his hands were resting on his knees. He held one out, and Mike took it. “What will you do now?” he asked quietly.

“Well, I’ll come back to Hosnian Prime with you.”

“I mean after that.”

In fact, Will knew this, but was stalling, to give himself time to

prepare what he wanted to say. "I'm not sure," he said eventually. "But I know that I had to imagine losing you today, and well, I didn't care for it."

"Welcome to my world," Mike said with a chuckle, which made him wince.

"But I can't keep doing this," he went on, gesturing around to the ship and the world in general. "This life doesn't suit me anymore."

"I thought it suited you quite well today."

"No, I suit *it*," Will corrected gently. "I don't think that's the same thing."

"Well then, what if I came back to Rishaani with you?" Mike said tentatively. "I know you want to go back, and I'm sure between us we can drum up enough credits to, you know, not live in a cave."

"How do you mean?" Will was barely aware that he was leaning closer to Mike, who just smiled.

"I think you know how I mean," he murmured, closing the gap between them.

Will closed his eyes as Mike's lips met his own, and he cradled Mike's face with his flesh hand. He'd forgotten what this felt like, never allowing himself to reminisce or imagine that it might happen again. He'd forgotten the *swoop* he felt in his belly at Mike's touch, and the faint scent of mint which lingered around him. He'd forgotten the how to enjoy the unguarded warmth of human contact, and the easy, casual push-pull of their intimate moments.

The moment broke suddenly as Mike sucked in a sharp breath of pain, and rolled his shoulder in its socket to alleviate the sting.

"Are you alright?" Will asked, helping him back into a more comfortable position.

"I will be," he replied, and Will leaned down to kiss him on the temple as he lay down again.

“Rest,” he said quietly, brushing a few strands of hair out of his eyes. “I should go to the cockpit to check on the others.”

Under the New Republic, the capital changed every few years. Initially, Coruscant had briefly remained the galactic centre during the initial changeover; Chandrila had then taken up the mantle, until a year prior, when Hosnian Prime had been elected as the New Republic’s capital. Under this structure, systems could not hold successive terms, but could be subsequently reassigned. Now, Hosnian Prime loomed in front of them as they returned to realspace, its vast cityscape making the planet glow in the night, which shrouded the planet’s eastern hemisphere.

To nobody’s surprise, the shuttle immediately found itself surrounded by a squadron of X-wings with their s-foils in attack position. “Please hold your fire,” Lucas said urgently into the communicator. “This ship was requisitioned from the Empire, we are not Imperials.”

“Your transponder log is not on our systems,” replied one of the pilots. *“State your affiliation and business.”*

“Various affiliations,” Lucas said, trying to sound sure of himself. “One from the New Republic Navy, one from Mandalore, two from the New Jedi Academy, and three unspecified. Six of us are ex-Rebellion. We bring intelligence on the Empire’s movements in the Outer Rim.” At this point, Mike limped in, leaning on the wall, and Will hastily vacated his seat for him. “One of our number has sustained some serious injuries. We request his transferral to a medical facility upon our arrival.”

There was a long silence; Will supposed they were debating the issue amongst themselves. Finally, the voice of the pilot who had already spoken rattled through the speaker grille. *“We’ll escort you down to a landing bay and supervise your inspection. Try anything funny and we’ll shoot to kill.”*

“Understood,” Lucas said. “Following your lead.”

The first two X-wings began their descent, and Dustin and Lucas

moved the ship into position behind, leaving the final two fighters to bring up the rear. They landed gently, and all seven of them held up their hands compliantly as they stepped off the ship. A small inspection crew marched in, as one of the pilots approached them.

“Are you expected?” she asked, addressing Lucas, but then she noticed Dustin. “Commander Henderson?” she added in surprise. “I apologise, I didn’t – ”

“We are expected,” Dustin interrupted, holding up a hand, “but not with news of this nature.”

“Is Senator Wheeler in-system?” Mike asked, and the pilot looked nonplussed.

“I’ll have to check,” she said. “Is it her you’re expecting to meet?” They nodded as one. “If your inspection comes back clear, I’ll make arrangements for you to get to her.”

A medical capsule arrived a few moments later, which Mike protested was overkill. As it turned out, the medics were inclined to agree with this assessment: they complimented Will’s initial treatments, and said that they would offer Mike some pain relief, but that given the nature of his injuries, there was little they could do which Will had not already done.

The shuttle inspection, however, took over an hour, and by the time the crew emerged from the hold confirming that the ship was clear, it was well into the middle of the night. Djenna had curled up on some supply crates (“Like a Loth-cat,” El had said fondly of her apprentice), and Mike had fallen asleep on Will’s shoulder.

Everyone was exhausted from the physical and emotional exertion of their escapade, and when a smart city hovercab stopped in front of them, Will nearly cried. He just wanted to crawl into the shuttle and go to sleep, not be transported to yet *another* place where he’d have to make civil conversation with officials and politicians and whomever else. He gently nudged Mike awake and helped him onto his feet, slipping an arm around his waist to support him to the

hovercab.

They were brought swiftly to the Senate building, where they passed through multiple security checks before arriving at a smart office bedecked in lilac velvet. Max shot Dustin a pointed look, but Will couldn't fathom why this could be, so shrugged it off. He lowered Mike into one of the softer armchairs facing the desk, and perched on its arm while they waited, concerned that if he made himself too comfortable, he'd just drop off to sleep.

However, they didn't have to wait long before two figures appeared at the office door, looking surprisingly put-together for such an absurdly early hour. Will froze as he recognised the second one, before willing away his dignity and practically sprinting across the room to hug his brother.

"Will," Jonathan gasped, clutching him so tightly that he thought he might break. "When they said it was... I didn't... I thought..." Will hardly knew what to say, but finally, Jonathan let him go and looked him up and down in utter disbelief. "Where have you *been*?"

"It would take a while," he said quietly. "Do you have some time?"

"Of course I do," he said immediately. "As much as you want." Will turned to Dustin, who nodded. "You go, we've got this." He smiled gratefully, and pressed a kiss to the top of Mike's head, before wandering out of the office with Jonathan. They certainly had a lot to catch up on.

Mike could only remember seeing the inside of the Senate chamber a handful of times as a child, but as he stood in the sleek delegation pod slowly circling the Chancellor's podium, he felt an uncanny sense of déjà-vu. He heard Max whisper something to Dustin ("Even *this* is the same!") from which he could divine no meaning, but he shook it off. He was barely awake, but he knew they would never have another chance to address the galactic powers in such a way, so he struggled to sit up a little and forced his eyes to come into focus.

It had been agreed that Dustin, Lucas and El should conduct the address. Max greatly protested this, but Lucas gently reminded her that until a pardon was attained for her and Mike, they were technically still outlaws.

Nancy was addressing the Chamber, and the others waited uneasily, crammed into the guest seats, almost too nervous to breathe. Finally, a murmur went up as Nancy finished speaking, and Dustin stood up to the microphone at the front of the pod. It had been agreed that he should begin the address, being the most familiar with the New Republic's policies and methods.

"Delegates of the Senate," he said, his loud voice carrying excellently and echoing off the Chamber's rounded walls, "I am Commander Dustin Henderson of the New Republic cruiser *Serendipity*. We come before you today with the gravest of news." He paused for effect. "The Empire is rebuilding; or, I should say, *has* rebuilt. Their infrastructure is already sound, their fleet is ready to be deployed, and their strength grows with every passing day."

Lucas joined him at the microphone and removed his helmet impressively, as a murmur of scepticism reverberated around the Chamber. "This troubling reality," Lucas said, in a calm but accusatory tone, "is the direct action of the Imperial splinter group in the Unknown Regions. This Chamber, incidentally, has repeatedly voted against motions to investigate these rumours. Action may now be too late."

"And who are you," shouted an angry voice from a pod somewhere below them, "to come before us and speak of our inaction, *Mandalorian?*"

Lucas stared down at his accuser with utter contempt. "As a Mandalorian, I am more aware of your inaction than most, *Senator*," he said coldly. "Since the Empire's purge on my planet, how many of your policies were raised in Mandalore's favour? How much of your budget has been allocated to foreign aid, with the aim to bring Outer Rim systems into the New Republic? The rebuilding of Mandalore," he went on, raising his voice to counter the grumbles of dissent from around the Chamber, "was completed entirely by our own people, and only in the last couple of years. I carry as much right as *anyone*

to criticise this government's negligence."

"Order," called the Dowutin Speaker in a gruff voice.

"We have more to report," El said, swiftly stepping up to the microphone, and a stunned hush gripped the Chamber. Mike was unsurprised by this; El was instantly recognisable by her attire and the metal lightsaber hilt clipped to her belt. He doubted the senators had ever been addressed by a Jedi whilst in session. "The Empire are now calling themselves the First Order," she said, her calm presence commanding total silence, "and have reoccupied the ice planet of Ilum in the Unknown Regions. You may recognise this name," she went on, "from the reports, circulated after the Battle of Jakku, of the former Empire's dealings. Before, they stripped the planet of its precious kyber crystals, using them to power the weapon systems of the two Death Stars." She waited for the ensuing mutters to die down. "If the First Order has re-established a mining operation on Ilum, it is reasonable to conclude that they are attempting to construct a similar weapon."

"Reasonable to conclude?" protested another senator. "Chancellor Slessly, Mr Speaker, are you really going to permit these Rebel pretenders to waste our time with these... speculations?"

"These are not speculations," El said severely without raising her voice. "They are observations. We have witnessed first-hand the First Order's numbers, and the size and strength of their operation. As a Jedi," she went on, as a groan rippled around the Chamber, "I am honour-bound to the pursuit of knowledge and truth. What could we possibly have to gain from these allegations, if not to increase the safety and security of our galaxy and its inhabitants?"

"We acknowledge the New Republic's failings," Lucas added, and Mike winced at the wording, "as an example of what may continue to happen if this Chamber continues to turn a blind eye to the way in which the system is being undermined."

"But there is no *proof*!" bellowed the opposing senator. "What do you expect us to do in the absence of any proof?"

"Proof?" Dustin repeated in disbelief. "Might I remind you, Senator, that the Alliance which founded this government once launched a

full-scale attack on an Imperial base on the word of a single prisoner? An attack which, incidentally, resulted in the first major victory against the Empire in nearly two decades!”

“When we came before you today,” Lucas went on, “we were aware of the reaction we would receive. We were not naïve enough to assume that every representative in this chamber would believe us, or even listen to us. Such is the strength of our conviction that we came anyway. It is essential that we be heard.”

Another delegation pod hovered smoothly out into the open Chamber, and Chancellor Slessly raised his voice for the first time since they’d started speaking.

“The Chamber recognises the Honourable Senator of the Alderaan Colony Fleet.” A formidable woman in her early thirties stepped up to her microphone, and the crew dared to hope again, for they knew her by sight.

“Chancellor, fellow representatives,” she said sharply, “how many times have we had this same argument? How many times have informants come to us with reports of Imperial support rallying in the Outer Rim? How many more incidents of sabotage, or reports of dark troopers, or Imperial sieges, must we endure before this Chamber decides to act?” She paused, her eyebrows pinching together. “Or would this Chamber prefer to sit back and watch, as the Old Republic Senate once did, while the government we have worked to build crumbles to nothingness, leaving this so-called First Order as the sole power in the galaxy?” Outraged protest met this implication that the senators wanted a second Empire, and Mike suspected this was exactly what she’d intended.

“Order!” bellowed the Dowutin Speaker Again. “*Order!*”

“Senator Organa,” the Chancellor said severely, “your remarks are misplaced.”

“On the contrary, Chancellor,” she replied, matching his tone, “I see no *evidence* to suggest that this government has any interest in keeping us safe from the forces which threaten our democracy and our lives.” With this, she pressed a button on her control unit, and

her delegation pod reversed to its position at the edge of the Chamber.

“It shall go to a vote, then,” Slessly said after a few moments’ reflection. “On behalf of your represented systems, indicate whether this Chamber should send an official delegation to the Ilum system, to determine the validity of this report.”

“Objection, Chancellor!” Nancy called, pushing past the others and stepping up to her microphone. “Even if this Chamber voted in favour, such a mission would be suicide a second time. The First Order will already have tightened its security. No further delegation would even get close enough to Ilum to provide the evidence you demand. I maintain that in spite of its shortcomings, this is the most accurate, most in-depth report of which we are capable.”

“Objection overruled,” Slessly said. “Cast your vote, Senator.”

Nancy jabbed her finger angrily on the green button on her control pad, indicating her support of the motion, despite her misgivings. “You did your best,” Mike said weakly; the pain relief the medics had issued him had started to rapidly wear off.

“We all did,” she said gloomily. “Let’s hope it’s enough.”

Voting took some time, as many systems were far more hesitant to vocalise their support, or otherwise. Many occupants of delegation pods argued for nearly half an hour with their colleagues and, less frequently, other senators, prompting several more calls to order from the Speaker on the Chancellor’s podium.

Finally, the Chancellor stood up again, and announced, “The votes have been counted, and the results tallied.” He pressed a button on his podium, and a massive hologram projection appeared above him. Mike glanced up, hardly daring to look – and buried his head in his hands. Cries of protest and outrage burst out from the pod’s other occupants, but they went unheard in the cacophony of noise echoing around the Chamber. El looked over at Mike in dismay, and he shook his head minutely.

It was over. Everything they'd fought for, and lost – they were going to lose it all again, because of the authorities' desperate need for plausible deniability; their determination to ignore the threats they faced for the sake of an easy life. He stared past the edge of the pod, feeling impossibly angry, but unspeakably numb.

"That's that, then," Nancy said sadly, and reversed the pod into its dock. They trooped out, in shock, and met Will and Jonathan, who were still staring through the door into the chamber, gazing in disbelief at the result, which was still hovering over the Chancellor's podium.

"They're not going to do anything?" Will said, pulling Mike into a gentle hug.

Mike snorted. "That was only to send a scout team to confirm what we told them."

"We didn't even get to that point," Dustin added bitterly.

"Told you," Max said quietly, and Dustin chewed his lip. He seemed to be making up his mind about something.

"So... what now?" Lucas asked.

Will found that he didn't really know what to say, and neither did anybody else. He couldn't stand the thought of them going their separate ways, having completely failed their final mission, and he suspected the others felt the same. Eventually, though, they all seemed to wordlessly reach this conclusion, and started trudging back towards the shuttle.

"Just a moment," called a voice. They turned as one, and blinked in shock, for approaching them was Senator Organa, from the surviving Alderaan Colony. She smiled warmly at them, dismissing her two guard troopers who attended her. "Walk with me," she said, and it didn't occur to anyone to disobey. "I wanted to thank you," she said sincerely. "That was the closest vote of this kind I've ever seen."

"Close?" Will said in disbelief. "It was overruled by nearly six

thousand votes!”

“Exactly,” she replied. “The last time there was such a report, it was overruled by nearly twice that. However,” she went on, “I’ve realised I can’t sit back and watch as the Senate insists on doing nothing, or I am complicit in their inaction.”

“What are you suggesting?” Dustin asked.

“An... oppositional organisation, of sorts. Operating outside of New Republic authority, to keep an eye on this First Order.”

“You’re forming a new Rebellion,” Mike said shrewdly, and Senator Organa offered him a wry smile.

“Nothing quite as anarchistic – just making sure the new Empire meets some... resistance if it tries its hand against the New Republic.” She looked at each of them in turn. “I would be very appreciative of your help – all of you, if you’re willing.”

“Absolutely,” Max said immediately, and after a moment of wrestling silently with himself, Dustin nodded.

“I’m in too. I was considering resigning from the Navy,” he said, and Will suddenly understood what he and Max had been talking about. “It took going outside of the New Republic to see how it was falling apart.”

“Maybe don’t resign,” Senator Organa said thoughtfully. “Not just yet, anyway. It’s a position that could help us greatly.” She turned to the others, and El shook her head. “No, I didn’t think so.”

“You know you can always count on us,” she said, placing an arm around Djenna’s shoulder. “But I’m sure you, of all people, understand our commitment.”

“Of course,” she replied graciously.

“Nor me, I’m afraid,” Lucas said regretfully. “I have a people to lead. But if you ever need to go underground – figuratively or literally – you can be sure of refuge.”

Finally, Senator Organa turned to Mike and Will, and Will looked anxiously up at him. “Forgive us, Senator,” Mike said, “but we’ll need a few minutes.”

“By all means,” she said. “I realise the magnitude of what I’m asking you to commit to. Take all the time you need.”

Mike leaned on Will for support, and Will led them away from the group. “Talk to me,” Mike said gently, once they were out of earshot. “Walk me through it.”

“I just... can’t be in two places at once,” Will replied simply. “I made an oath, Mike. I’ve been away from Rishaani too long already.”

“This is bigger than just Rishaani, though. This is about protecting the galaxy from whatever the First Order is planning.”

“I know,” Will sighed. “That’s why I’m not sure.”

They walked in silence for a few moments, as Will reflected on his options. On the one hand, he was almost being offered a portal back in time – a return to the life he had once known, with the people he loved, and whom he had missed for six years. On the other hand, Will didn’t feel like the same person who had fought in the Battle of Jakku, and he wasn’t sure he even wanted to return to that life. The prospect of settling down with Mike was far more enticing, to say the least. After all, he’d only ever wanted a quiet life, and he certainly felt as though he’d earned it.

But would it be enough? asked a small voice in his head, as they slumped onto a storage crate to rest. It was a fair question: would he ever be satisfied with a life of domesticity, eternally defending a small, backwater planet in the Outer Rim? Besides, his oath would expire eventually anyway, as he wouldn’t live forever. Whatever he chose, Rishaani would be left without a protector eventually, which was a sobering thought.

It was starting to occur to Will that he would second-guess whichever option he chose. Unless... what if he could have the best of both

worlds?

“Will?” Mike asked tentatively, and Will returned to the present. He’d completely forgotten Mike was even there, he had been so absorbed in his thoughts. He looked into Mike’s anxious face with a degree of urgency.

“What do *you* want to do?” he asked, and Mike blinked in surprise.

“I don’t really care,” he said, as though it were that simple. “As long as you’re there too.”

“Good, that’s what I thought.” Will nodded slowly. “I need to speak with the senator.” He scrambled to his feet and helped Mike up. “Senator Organa,” he said loudly, and she turned her head to face him. “I – that is, we – will join your Resistance.” Her lips curled into a serene smile. “However,” he went on, with renewed confidence, “not on the front lines. Goodness knows we’ve seen enough firefights to last a lifetime.”

“I assure you, I understand that,” she said with a chuckle. “Then... what would you like to do? An authority position, perhaps?”

Will shook his head. “Heroes for hire, if you will. Between us, we have, ah, a rather particular skillset.”

“You could say that,” Mike put in with a smile.

“If you ever have need of us,” Will went on, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a long-range communicator, “have someone signal this, and we’ll be there.”

“And like Lucas said, if any members of your Resistance are ever passing Rishaani,” Mike added, slipping a hand into Will’s, “they can be sure of a warm welcome and a safe fuel-stop.”

“Thank you,” Senator Organa said sincerely, and she slipped the communicator into the pocket of her robes. “You have done a great service to the New Republic – and the Resistance.” She looked directly at Mike and Max. “I shall personally attend to your pardons.”

Mike squeezed Will's hand and bowed respectfully. "Thank you, ma'am."

"I have to return to the Colony," she said, addressing Will. "May the Force be with you."

Will's eyebrows flickered in surprise, but replied, "Thank you, Senator. May the Force be with you."

At these parting words, Senator Organa turned and walked away. Once she was gone, they all exchanged excited hugs, in celebration of their small victory, and the prospect of a new cause to fight for. No one doubted that the path ahead of them would be difficult, but a spark of resistance was lit anew. While there was light, there was hope. While there was hope, they could never be truly overcome.

The large town in the middle of Rishaani's island had once been encircled by a high stone wall, out of fear of invaders and pirates. Some years prior, it had been partially destroyed during one such attack – a raid which had failed so spectacularly that word had spread among the web of mercenaries across the galaxy: *Rishaani is defended*. The remainder of the wall had been left to crumble, for the town had since known nothing but peace and prosperity, and had no need of its high defences.

Just beyond the outskirts stood a cottage, with wooden fences marking out a smallholding, sprawled around a large tree. In the light of the planet's moons, it cast multiple shadows across the paddock, under which a number of different animals were sleeping peacefully. Behind the cottage, a small ship was docked; it had once been an Imperial shuttle, but in the years since, its owners had tinkered with it, tweaked its design, and given it a fresh coat of paint. Now, the affectionately-named *Ebony Hawk II* bore only a passing resemblance to the ship it had once been. A faint yellow light was emanating from the cottage windows, its main room lit only by the dying embers of the fire in the hearth. That its glow was dim mattered not, at that moment; its occupants were dozing side by side, their hands linked across the arms of their adjacent chairs.

An ageing astromech droid whirred in a corner, using one of its

clawed arms to reach for a communicator on the mantel, which was beeping quietly. The droid let out a low whistle, and one of the two men stirred, running a durasteel hand through his chestnut-brown hair, streaked sporadically with grey after years of trials. Will slipped his hand of flesh out of Mike's hold and reached for the communicator the droid was holding.

"Thanks, Chester," he said sleepily, gently shaking Mike's shoulder to rouse him. The little droid trundled away, chuntering about how nothing would get done in the house if he wasn't there to do it. "Mike, it's the Resistance," he said, which woke his husband up considerably faster.

"What's happened?"

Will shrugged. "Let's find out." He pressed a button on the side of the communicator, and it projected a hologram of two familiar figures.

"Jet One, Jet Six," said Dustin. "It's been a while. You may not have heard, but the First Order is quietly taking over Outer Rim systems that aren't in the New Republic."

"It's too late to help them without the support of the Republic," Max added, "but we need someone to lead an evacuation of the civilians. We can send a battalion of troops and transports to assist. Are you in?"

Will glanced at Mike, who nodded. "Affirmative," Will said with a smile. "Send Chester the co-ordinates. We'll leave immediately." The hologram faded, and a low mechanical warbling confirmed that Chester had successfully received the information.

"Looks like we're off again," Mike said, easing himself from his armchair and pulling on his flight jacket.

"About time too," Will joked. "It's been months since we last had anything to do."

"I thought you wanted this?" Will could tell Mike was teasing, but there was a hint of concern in his voice – he was checking, as he always had, that Will was content, and Will smiled.

"I do," he said simply, summoning his lightsabers from the

mantelpiece and clipping them to his belt. This done, he reached for Mike and pulled him into a gentle, reassuring hug. “I wouldn’t swap our life for anything.” Mike tilted his head down a little, and Will pressed a brief kiss to his lips. “Love you,” he said quietly, before adding, more briskly, “come on, let’s not keep the Resistance waiting.”

“I’ll contact De’Bora and ask her to watch the animals,” Mike said, as Will started packing essentials into a satchel.

“Great, and I’ll send Lucas and El a message and see if either of them are free to help us out. We might need them if the First Order figures out what we’re doing too soon.” Chester passed him a couple of canteens of water, and Will absently patted the droid’s domed head as he stowed them in the bag.

They left the fire to die down, and crossed the darkened yard to the ship, flicking various switches as they entered to power it up. Within minutes, they had lifted into the air, and Will glanced down at their little town as they drew rapidly up into the stratosphere.

“We’ll be back,” Mike said reassuringly, and Will nodded.

“I know we will.”

“Setting course for Ahn-Tayok,” Mike said, and they both reached for the hyperspace lever. “Reaching lightspeed in three... two... one...”

The stars lengthened, their fingers locked together, and their little ship vanished into hyperspace, carrying them away, to where a new adventure awaited them.

Notes for the Chapter:

I can't believe this series is finally finished. This is, officially, the end. Thank you immensely to everyone who has read, enjoyed, left kudos, commented - in other words, who has humoured me with this incredibly self-indulgent story. I'm glad to have gone on this journey with you!

As always, I love to hear your thoughts, but if you also have any questions about this universe and its characters, I have spent a LOT of time thinking about it, so I'd be happy to answer them through the usual channels! 🤗

Author's Note:

I hope you enjoyed! If so, please do leave a comment, or else hit me up on Tumblr (@tea-for-one-please)!